

Judgment, Trust, and Common Sense

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Judgment, Trust, and Common Sense

Essays on Making Sense of Things

Jacob S. Oliver

CSC | COMMON
SENSE
COMMUNICATIONS

For my sons, who will need to know these things.

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Abbreviations

CM.....The Confidence-Man

CPJ.....Critique of the Power of Judgment

CPR.....Critique of Pure Reason

HF.....Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

*Listen,
If I didn't have so much of this life all wrong
I would have gotten it right by now.
I talk a whole bunch,
But I really know only a few things
So I'm not saying to follow along verbatim here.
I'll just tell ya the things I tell myself
The things I know
And you can see what sticks.¹*

¹ Buddy Wakefield, *Live for a Living* (Write Bloody Publishing, 2007), 134-38. See also Buddy Wakefield, "The Information Man" <https://vimeo.com/4646593>.

1. On Common Sense

Who are you gonna believe — me, or your own eyes?

—MARX²

Everyone thinks they have common sense. Descartes, in employing the not-quite identical (but very close counterpart) term “*bon sens*,” noted as much in the introduction to his *Discourse on the Method*, memorably quipping that:

Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world: for everyone thinks himself so well-endowed with it that even those who are the hardest to please in everything else do not usually desire more of it than they already possess. In this it is unlikely that everyone is mistaken.³

Now, I like a good rhetorical flourish as much anyone, and Descartes is obviously quite pleased with his own *bon mot* here. But I have never seen anyone hit the nail so squarely on the head—and then immediately veer in so wrong a direction—as Descartes did in 1637.

² Leo McCarey, dir., *Duck Soup* (Universal Pictures, 1933).

³ Descartes, Rene. *Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting one’s reason and seeking the truth in the sciences*. Selected Philosophical Writings, translated by John Cottingham and Robert Stoothoff, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 20.

His first point is well-taken. Certainly, most of us would comfortably admit that we know only a tiny fraction of everything there is to know in the world, but there are very few who doubt that they have sufficient “good sense” to make sound judgments about it. That said, universal confidence is no indicator of universal rightness—surely every reader will have come across at least one or two people in the world who were, without any doubt at all, utterly devoid of anything we’d call good sense, common or otherwise. While it’s true that everyone believes themselves to be abundantly supplied with common sense, it’s also true that many of us are likely wrong, at least some of the time.

Why René Descartes, the great doubter of the Enlightenment, is willing to grant such a huge benefit of the doubt toward everyone’s capacity to make this call about their own cognitive faculty, without error or prejudice, altogether escapes me. But he does, and to no one does he grant it more immediately than himself, for Descartes certainly thought that he had good sense, and a lot of it. Indeed, it’s difficult to imagine anyone composing a treatise called *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences* without thinking highly of their own intellect. What Descartes does not do in this passage, however, is to allow any room for wondering if he can trust his own good sense, which is to say, his ability to trust his own judgment. And this, it turns out, is the very mistake that every one of us makes when we first start to use our individual reason to make sense of the world; our ability to recognize and account for that mistake is what marks the difference between bullheadedness and common sense.

* * *

This book began as an inquiry into the concept of common sense. Several years ago, and for more reasons than are worth going into here, I asked whether it would be possible to sort out what it means to have

(or use) common sense. It seemed important, given the universality of the appeal to common sense as a rhetorical tool, that we at least have some common understanding of what it meant to use our common sense in the first place, especially if we were going to let it be a metric for evaluating norms and debating policy. Further, given that I'd sold my doctoral committee on the idea of a dissertation on the subject, I was practically bound to figure it out if I wanted a degree to show for it. So, I did.

But it was not easy, and it was not straightforward. As with Augustine's famous rumination on the nature of time,⁴ pressing for a clear definition quickly encounters substantial difficulties, apparent contradictions, and logical dead ends. Just a quick glance at common reference materials reveals that common sense is often characterized in terms too vague to mean much upon scrutiny. For instance, *Wikipedia*, still the gold standard among online encyclopedias, describes it as "knowledge, judgment, and taste which is more or less universal and which is held more or less without reflection or argument,"⁵ while *Merriam-Webster* calls it "prudent judgment based on a simple perception of the situation or facts."⁶ Worst of all is the *Cambridge English Dictionary*'s definition of common sense as "the basic level of practical knowledge and judgment that we all need to help us live in a reasonable and safe way,"⁷ which is on about the same level of rigor as a middle school classroom poster.

⁴ "What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks me, I do not know." See Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Christopher D. Hudson and J. Alan Sharrer (Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 244.

⁵ "Common Sense," *Wikipedia*, last modified Aug. 9 2024.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_sense.

⁶ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. S.v. "common sense." Accessed August 9, 2024.
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/common%20sense>.

⁷ *Cambridge English Dictionary*, S.v. "common sense," accessed August 11, 2024,
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/common-sense>.

While sensible at first glance, such definitions collapse upon close inspection into nebulous half-concepts and inconsistent systems that only hang together by convention. What makes a judgment “prudent,” and by whose standards? How “simple” is a perception, and how can I be sure that mine aligns with those of others? What is the “basic level of practical knowledge” that a general population can be expected to know? All these questions are further fraught by the observation that the very notion of a universally applicable definition of common sense seems increasingly dubious amidst a rise in clashing cultural perspectives, which are only intensifying and proliferating as we hurtle headlong into the rest of the 21st century.

While dictionary definitions are often so vague as to be almost useless, there are nevertheless two denotational considerations that must be emphasized at the outset, as they will be integral to all subsequent discussions. The first is the definition of “common,” which connotes the communal or the collective. Communal living has been essential to human survival and progress since long before the rise of civilization. As social primates, cooperation enables social life and ensures our viability as a species. From our earliest evolutionary stages, cooperative social behavior has been imperative, despite the complexities of civilization. Chief among these behaviors is the possession of shared understandings of our external world, without which coordinated action would be impossible.

The second term is the polysemous word “sense,” which spans multiple layered meanings. Most immediately, it refers to the spontaneous sensory data gathered by our faculties: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. However, “sense” also denotes internal determinations of meaning and significant qualities. For example, we speak of having a “sense of fairness” or a “sense of humor.” Frances Hutcheson offers a framing of the word in *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* that is as sufficient as any: “If we may call every Determination of our Minds to receive Ideas independently of our Will, and to have Perceptions of Pleasure and

Pain, a Sense, we shall find many other Senses beside those commonly explained.”⁸ Thus “common sense,” indicating collectively held knowledge, intrinsically integrates these dual meanings of communal experience and individual discernment. It relies upon agreed-upon interpretations developed through shared sensations, perceptions, and perspectives within a society. Yet it also depends upon personal faculties of comprehension and appraisal applied within that wider social context. This interdependence of communal and individual sense-making underpins the entire notion of “common sense” and consistently frustrates the attempt to formalize any “theory” of the term.

Therefore, it is more telling to ask human beings—preferably real, living ones who can answer you in person—what they think common sense is. When you do, you are likely—almost certain, in fact—to get one of two answers:⁹

1. **“Common knowledge.”** The first answer you’ll get is something like common sense means common knowledge, meaning whatever is the set of what ‘everybody knows’ in any given community or culture. These commonplace assumptions range from the deeply reliable and practical to the fanciful or superstitious. In recent centuries, much scientific knowledge that has become more widely accessible has passed into the realm of “common knowledge” as well, insofar as the general public’s knowledge of such subjects is secondhand, as it were, having been obtained through such communal knowledge-sharing structures rather than through being trained as experts.

⁸ Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*. London, 1728, p4.

⁹ I don’t have any hard statistical data or survey results to back this up—just anecdotal evidence. But so far, this has been true 100% of the time, no matter who I’ve asked while writing an entire book on the subject, so if you’re skeptical, I’d implore you to try it yourself.

The defining characteristic of a commonplace assumption, whatever its actual validity may be, is that it is *received from the community*, not arrived at through individual reasoning. Which brings us to...

2. **“Thinking for oneself.”** This theory of common sense comes down to the idea that it is our capacity for individual reason that lies at the heart of common sense, and while this seems a tempting definition on the surface, it simply does not go far enough to distinguish between genuine commonsense thinking and a head full of nonsense. Being able to think for oneself is not very useful unless one is very good at thinking, which, like anything else, only happens with practice, reflection, critique, and more practice.

Neither of these definitions works on its own. The first supposes that common sense is nothing more than cultural norms, and that is simply not sufficient—there are plenty of scenarios in which using one’s common sense means *not* believing whatever it is that everyone else seems to think is true. The second presumes that one’s own reasoning is naturally more credible than that of others and often fails to appreciate the extent to which harmonious social life depends upon collective judgments. It is also profoundly arrogant.

Since these common attempts to articulate common sense prove frustratingly inadequate when translated into actual practice, these essays seek *functional clarity* regarding common sense by addressing what specific cognitive processes underlie the faculty of sound judgment. I’m not interested in articulating a formal theory of common sense, not in any small part because I’ve come to believe that the very idea of such a thing doesn’t make much sense in the first place. All I will say as a general maxim on the subject at this point is that no matter which angle you come at it from, common sense is about the practical first and last; the theoretical second, and only sometimes. That doesn’t mean there isn’t anything to say about common sense that doesn’t fail

when subjected to intellectual rigor. There is, and I'm going to. But be advised that it requires some serious unpacking of what it is we think we are doing (and what we really are doing) when we think through problems, test old theories, learn new facts, reject bad ideas, and, ultimately, make decisions.

There are, however, workable starting points for meaningful inquiry, and I will begin with this one: There can be no doubt that making a common-sense judgment happens within the process of thinking. Too frequently, assertions of independent thought really signify unreflective acceptance of whatever ideas spontaneously occur to us. Equally dubious is dismissing disagreeable propositions outright as “absurd” under the guise of “critical thinking.” In truth, thinking in good faith requires scrutiny of our own judgments, not just those of others. Unchecked confidence in our immediate capacity for infallible reasoning constitutes deeply flawed thinking, and to equate immediate, reflexive mental reaction with sound judgment and common sense demonstrates a lack of both. Thinking is not the mere occurrence of ideas, but a conscious, deliberate process that demands recognizing our inherent cognitive biases and proneness to error. Common sense and good judgment, therefore, do not stem from simply trusting whichever notions spring to mind. They require conscious reflection upon the reasoning behind an honest assessment of the grounds of the decision—good judgments are not abstract intellectual exercises, they involve making sense of the real, raw materials of experience.

***De Sensus Communis*: What “Everybody Knows”**

There are two semantic variants of the term “common sense” that have emerged within Western languages over the last several centuries. The first and older of these characterizes common sense as a kind of agreed-upon, community-contingent version of quasi-dogmatic commonplaces. Often referred to in common parlance as “common

knowledge,” this conception is termed *sensus communis*. This kind of “knowledge” comprises propositions describing proposed facts or ethical judgments that are commonly accepted within a community. Although frequently translated as “common sense,” it is much more accurate to conceive of it as the “communal sense,” or “sense of the community.” *Sensus communis* is what “everybody knows” — it is not only what everyone assumes to be true; it is what everyone presumes everyone *else* assumes is true.

The second, more modern framing of common sense emerged between the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. This perspective prioritized the role of individual reason in common sense, and its history within the Western intellectual canon is deeply intertwined with moments that involved rejecting the prevailing *sensus communis* during critical times. Notable examples include the studies of Copernicus and Galileo, who fundamentally challenged theologically prescribed astronomical principles in favor of their meticulous work in astronomy and mathematics. By the late 18th century, this mode of thought was epitomized by what Kant famously termed the “motto” of the Enlightenment: *sapere aude*, commonly translated as “dare to use your own reason.” As we will see by the end of this book, each of these instances is crucial for articulating a process of using one’s common sense, though neither is sufficient on its own.

The latter formulation of common sense, which aligns more closely with our contemporary understanding of the term within the Western liberal democratic tradition, took shape in the 18th century. This shift moved away from the older, more communally driven idea of common sense, historically known as *sensus communis* or common knowledge—a concept championed by Giambattista Vico—to a more modern conception that emphasizes individual reasoning. This version of common sense is most clearly articulated in Thomas Paine’s 1776 pamphlet, aptly named *Common Sense*, which encouraged readers to trust their own capacity for reason. Paine’s work was so influential that it is now not unusual for self-styled “free thinkers” to privilege their

own capacity for reason based solely on its individual nature, rather than on any particularly well-honed reasoning skills they may have developed.

It is a great irony that Paine's exhortation to individual reason eventually led to what might be termed a culture of intellectualism in which the primary criterion for validity is the smug belief in one's preconceived notions. We will revisit this point later, but first, we need to unpack the relationship between common sense and its historical counterpart, *sensus communis*. Until the early 18th century, *sensus communis* was what would have been recognized as common sense proper—often maintained under threats of ostracism, financial ruin, or physical violence. Indeed, for most of history, anyone who had a thought that questioned the status quo would have known that the “common sense” thing to do was to keep it to themselves.

While what we'd call “common sense” proper took shape in the 18th century as a product of the Enlightenment, it was preceded in the intellectual history of the West by the concept of *sensus communis*. Although often translated as “common sense,” *sensus communis* is better translated as “communal sense” or the “sense of the community.” Briefly, *sensus communis* encompasses the collected commonplace values, assumptions, and presumed knowledge of a given community. Though “common sense” is its English equivalent, the meaning of *sensus communis* is distinctly limited in that it does not stem from individual reflection but rather is defined by those common propositions that everyone in a community is likely to believe—or at least has been taught to believe—are true.¹⁰

¹⁰ Strangely, the ancient Greek term that most closely resembles the modern English term “common sense,” κοινή αἴσθησις (*koine aisthesis*), comes from Aristotle, but it has nothing to do with what we'd think of as common sense today. Aristotle described *koine aisthesis* as the faculty responsible for integrating various sensory inputs into a single perceptual act. This faculty discerns “common sensibles” such as motion, rest, shape, size, number, and unity—attributes not specific to one sense but perceived by several (e.g., both sight and touch can perceive shape and size). This definition of the term progressed into the medieval period, primarily through the work

Sensus communis has its roots in ancient Greek and Roman public life. In ancient Greek philosophy, particularly during the pre-Socratic and later Aristotelian periods, ἔνδοξα (endoxa) were commonly understood to be prevailing opinions or beliefs held by the majority or by the wise. These were not merely personal opinions, but rather beliefs that were widely respected and accepted by society, especially those endorsed by recognized authorities or experts. The pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, and perhaps some of the poets and tragedians, were among the few who challenged the prevailing *endoxa* as a way of life. This is, in fact, the entire structure of a standard Socratic dialogue, wherein the figure of Socrates, serving as Plato’s mouthpiece, engages in a series of debates that question the status quo. He does this in front of a group of individuals who typically respond with phrases like “Yes, Socrates,” “Of course, Socrates,” and “It could only be so, Socrates,” until he ultimately admits his own ignorance and concludes the conversation.

While it might be entertaining to expose the ignorance of those in power by talking circles around them, this approach proved unsustainable in practice—Socrates himself was famously sentenced to death for his inability to keep his mouth shut. Even Plato recognized that Socrates’ endless questioning inevitably led to more of the same, and by its very nature, could never yield anything reliably true. Plato encountered this dead-end—also through the figure of Socrates—in the late dialogue *Parmenides*, in which the eponymous sage takes the young freethinker to task and challenges *his* core assumptions to the point that they can no longer hold up. In his critique of Socrates, *Parmenides* demonstrates something that small children everywhere already understand—that continually pressing on the foundation

of Aquinas—Europeans largely ignored the interpretations of Ibn Rushd, but that is a discussion for another time. Aquinas adopted and expanded Aristotle’s idea within a Christian framework. In Latin, the term became “*sensus communis*.” And that’s where it stayed, more-or-less unchanged, for the subsequent five hundred years.

of *any* proposition (which is to say, interrogating its grounding) will reveal that virtually every proposition is ultimately built upon another that can itself be interrogated—i.e., if someone is truly committed to keep asking “*why*” forever, they can. But they will never arrive at a final “*because*.”

The contemporary notion of common sense as a universal baseline capacity for reasoning evolved from its roots in the Scientific Revolution, leading to a consequential revolution in philosophy that followed—and indeed, the philosophy followed the science. Developments in astronomy, in particular, demonstrated that neither colloquial wisdom nor recognized dogma was sufficient for accurately observing the universe. In 1543, Copernicus published *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, although he had mostly completed the work by 1532. Educated circles throughout Europe were aware of his hypothesis despite his reluctance to publish during his lifetime, fearing criticism or even punishment. Galileo, who championed Copernicus’ work within influential courts, faced the ire of authorities on account of his steadfast confidence in the heliocentric model; his tension was epitomized and made mythical in his apocryphal “recantation” in 1633: “*E pur si muove*” (“And yet, it moves”).¹¹ The Scientific Revolution, in many critical respects, involved critiquing and often rejecting the *sensus communis* where it conflicted with the evidence discovered through methods of experimentation, observation,

¹¹ The phrase “*E pur si muove*” (“And yet it moves,”) is often attributed to Galileo Galilei but is not documented as a direct quote from his lifetime. The association of this phrase with Galileo emerged through dramatic retellings of his life in later literature. Giuseppe Baretta’s *Biography of Galileo Galilei* (1822) contributed significantly to this association by incorporating the phrase to symbolize Galileo’s defiance and commitment to scientific truth. The 19th-century consolidation of Galileo’s legacy as a martyr for science is also reflected in the broader historical narrative in which pioneering scientists like Galileo were elevated as symbols of human inquiry and intellectual freedom. This trend highlights the phrase’s symbolic rather than historical accuracy concerning Galileo’s actual words. See Giuseppe Baretta, *Biography of Galileo Galilei* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1822); Richard S. Westfall, *Never at Rest: A Biography of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

and repetition, which proved to be more verifiable methodologies than either divine revelation or customary commonplaces.

By the early 18th century, the term *sensus communis* had been revived in European thought, particularly in the writings of Giambattista Vico, who argued that common sense “arises from perceptions based on verisimilitude.”¹² Vico recognized “verisimilitudes” as observable patterns in the world and in human behavior, which do not adhere with absolute strictness to formal rules. These patterns emerge from probabilities and tendencies, not laws, and are normative according to community standards, history, culture, and so forth. These patterns could be distilled into generalized propositions, which Vico was comfortable calling “common sense.” Vico used the Roman *sententiae* as the historical basis for his educational system, believing that “common sense” consisted of memorizing propositions derived from the received wisdom of the ancients. The history of the commonsense aphorism aligns with Vico’s work in *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (“The Method of the Study of Our Times”) and extends back to the Roman orators he revived—quick, pithy statements designed to convey generalizable facts about the world, often in the form of colloquial metaphors and regional idioms. These proverbs are often passed off under the guise of common sense, but they cannot be absolute rules for living, given that their authors and the times which produced them have been long relegated to the dustiest corners of history.

Plain Truths and Common Sense

The pivot to the modern conception of common sense took place in the 1770s and 1780s, and is largely owed to the work of two men:

¹² Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time* (United States: Cornell University Press, 2018), 13.

Thomas Paine and Immanuel Kant. You've heard of Thomas Paine: everybody in the English-speaking world has heard of Thomas Paine, and some of them have even read his work. His influence was immense in 1776 and continues to be so today. But if that immense influence was helpful in his own day (and it was), it has not always been so since, and in some way may have been actively destructive.

Immanuel Kant, however, may not be as familiar, but the Prussian philosopher whose books have tied the brains of philosophy students into knots for centuries also did some serious work on common sense — easily the most important work on the subject that anyone had done up to that point, and probably the most important work that anyone has done since. But Kant is virtually never read outside of universities in the United States and probably not in Europe anymore, either. This is understandable, given that his prose is impenetrable; it takes so much time to wade through *Critique of Pure Reason* that it becomes its own full-time job, demanding a university fellowship to justify it. Therefore, it's no wonder that when he did, in fact, articulate a reasonably sound theory of common sense in 1781 (more on that later as well) absolutely nobody noticed.

But people noticed Thomas Paine—very much so. Paine's arrival on the American revolutionary scene with the publication of *Common Sense* in 1776 marked a seismic shift not only in the colonial rhetoric surrounding independence but also in the very fabric of American intellectual traditions. With forceful clarity and unpretentious prose, Paine dismantled the complex loyalties to the British Crown, articulating a compelling argument for self-governance that resonated deeply with the common man. His words did not merely fan the flames of revolution; they kindled a robust tradition of skepticism towards authority and an unwavering belief in the power of individual discernment. His influence was both immediate and enduring, catalyzing the movement toward independence and laying foundational principles for a culture steeped in the valorization of personal judgment and rational thought. In a time when deference to inherited authority

was the norm, Paine's rhetoric offered a radical alternative: a call to self-reliance and personal conviction that would echo through American thought and policy. Paine, more than any other American writer, granted his audience permission to have faith in their own capacity for individual reason—their common sense.

Now, it doesn't take very long to see that this is a significant problem, at least from the perspective of organizing a functioning society. When a large group of individuals is tasked with governing itself and each member in that group believes their own thoughts and opinions are of equal importance as everyone else's, the resulting disagreements become intractable. But when all those people *do* agree on something, it can be quite the galvanizing force, as it was in 1776.

Such was the case with Paine's pamphlet, the focus of which was not so much on persuading Americans of the need to declare independence from Britain, but rather on rallying them to embrace the idea that the fight was not only imminent but actively underway. By appealing to each person's sense that their individual voices and their capacity for reason had significant importance in social governance, Thomas Paine was able to electrify the anti-monarchical spirit among American colonists. These colonists, having survived for generations across the ocean from the mother country, had become largely self-sufficient, relying little on British assistance for their survival or for governing their day-to-day affairs.

So, Paine, an Englishman, found in America an audience that was receptive to his message, as Americans were quite comfortable thinking for themselves already. In at least one regard, Thomas Paine anticipated the core insight of Kant's "*What is Enlightenment?* (1784) by eight years, as Americans had already been trusting their own reason for a long time. Outside of intensely religious communities, where deviation from prescribed beliefs was directly punishable, the capacity to "think for themselves" had already come to be viewed not just as a right but as a necessity of life, rather than merely a precursor to open discussion with others. With *Common Sense*, Paine spoke directly to

American readers—already confident in their own judgments—and explicitly encouraged them to trust their instincts. These cultural norms and values facilitated Paine’s great rhetorical achievement: he managed to persuade a populace, who prided themselves on individual reasoning, to all think the same thing about the same issue at the same time. I do not know that anyone has accomplished the same thing since.

As a public document, *Common Sense* accomplished exactly what its author intended: it articulated the revolutionary colonists’ belief that the Crown had little right to influence their affairs. Paine’s writing is punchy,¹³ persuasive, and strikes at a gut level, tapping into a self-righteous certainty among those outside of government and policymaking. It appeals to the belief that their own thoughts and opinions on complex geopolitical affairs—which are often neither studied nor informed—are the most valid. Though it was not until 1784 that Kant would codify *sapere aude* (loosely, “dare to use your own reason”) as the hallmark of the Enlightenment, Thomas Paine—and many Americans—were comfortably ahead of him, at least in believing they possessed that courage. In secular political settings, Americans have traditionally shown extraordinary confidence in their capacity to “think for themselves”—a confidence matched only by their reluctance to listen to others.

As soon as the war was over and the colonies faced the realities of governing their newly independent nation, the unifying passion for independence from the Crown quickly dissolved into intense

¹³ Take, for example, this absolute scorcher: “England, since the conquest, hath known some few good monarchs, but groaned beneath a much larger number of bad ones; yet no man in his senses can say that their claim under William the Conqueror is a very honorable one. A French bastard landing with an armed banditti, and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original. —It certainly hath no divinity in it. However, it is needless to spend much time in exposing the folly of hereditary right; if there are any so weak as to believe it, let them promiscuously worship the ass and lion, and welcome. I shall neither copy their humility, nor disturb their devotion.” See Thomas Paine, *The Life and Major Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Citadel Press, 1948; reprint, Carol Publishing Group, 1993), 14.

disagreements over every other matter of importance. In a semi-democratic state, every proponent on each side of a position was backed by the idea that each person had the capacity for individual reason. Therefore, they believed in the right to control their own affairs and voice their opinions on all matters of government. The problem festered until 1787, when, faced with the literal dissolution of the union and the prospect of American lands and interests being cannibalized once again by European powers, American delegates were forced to construct a working framework for government that took these convictions into account at the Constitutional Convention. But they still did not solve the underlying problem: how could common sense really be so common if a group of equally educated and rational men¹⁴ could so viciously disagree on what it meant to possess it?

Despite their varied interests and regional loyalties, these delegates recognized a fundamental need for unity in the face of external threats and internal fragmentation. The survival instinct—common in human behavior when confronted with existential threats—led them to postpone resolution on several contentious issues, such as the balance of power between state and federal governments and the question of slavery. This strategy of compromise, born out of a decade marked by war and political dysfunction, was pragmatic but also left unresolved tensions woven into the fabric of the nation. The framers often set aside their individual rational judgments in favor of compromises that, while imperfect, were deemed necessary for the nascent republic's immediate survival and future stability. But they did not solve the problem of how intractable disagreements could be worked through when everyone

¹⁴ The word is here meant with all its affrontive literalism. This was a group of people who were, from the outside looking it, demographically identical—white, professional-class, propertied men, most with law degrees. And even then, the idea that there could be any truly commonly held position or opinion of any kind only hung by a thread.

believes they have as much common sense as, or even more than, everybody else. And we have not solved it since, either.

2. Aesthetics, Understanding, and Judgment: The Process of Making Sense of Things

I don't understand. But I can tell it's bullshit.

— ZISSOU¹⁵

The most important philosophical work on common sense occurred in the time between the publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* in 1776 and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* in 1790. Paine's work we are already familiar with, but Kant's, while much more substantive, is less well known, in no small part because, unlike Paine, Kant was not interested in expressing his ideas in breezy or accessible prose. In 1781, the same year the American Revolution effectively ended with the Siege of Yorktown,¹⁶ Immanuel Kant published *Critique of Pure Reason*, which came to be widely regarded as his central and most important text by most of his followers and commentators. At first glance this is understandable—in its pages, Kant put forward many of the core tenets of his critical philosophy including his theory of judgment, which, at that point, was largely in keeping with the classical definition of a judgment (i.e., the

¹⁵ Wes Anderson, dir., *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (Touchstone Pictures, 2004; released 2005).

¹⁶ While the Treaty of Paris was not signed, and the United States not recognized as an independent nation by Great Britain, until 1783, the hostilities effectively ended with Gen. Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown in 1781. See Richard M. Ketchum, *Victory at Yorktown: The Campaign That Won the Revolution* (United States: Henry Holt and Company, 2014); Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: How America Declared Its Independence from Britain* (United Kingdom: Pimlico, 1999).

subsumption of a particular object of experience under a general concept).

After its publication, however, Kant recognized fundamental errors in the text concerning the function of judgment within the overall schema of thinking. The subsumption of a particular object, event, or other experience of the world under a general concept works perfectly well when there *are* applicable concepts available. But often (indeed, maybe even most of the time), we experience contingencies for which we do *not* have immediately applicable concepts; even more often we find that the context of a given situation does not allow for precise application of formal conceptions we think they ought to follow, and there is little we can do to make them. What can we do in these instances? If we encounter an object or event in the world that we do not understand how to make sense of, how are we to proceed? Certainly, at some point our ancestors would have had to formulate every concept handed down to us; to deny this is to take Descartes' position that God simply "put" recognizable ideas in our minds that coincided with reality.¹⁷

This realization led to the radical expansion of Kant's critical project from the planned single volume, *Critique of Pure Reason*, to the three-volume set we know today culminating in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. An unplanned treatise that only "emerged" out of Kant's efforts to recognize and repair small but fundamental errors in *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* recognized that traditional mode of making judgments about the world—i.e., that categorizing any object in the world under a general, if not universal, category (or form) was insufficient for explaining day-to-day decision-making.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

In *CPJ*, Kant explicitly shifts his focus from the **determining** to the **reflecting judgment**. The reflecting (sometimes “reflective”) judgment is a kind of concept *formation* (as opposed to *discovery*) that considers an object or occurrence vis-à-vis its discernible purpose and attempts to consider as many relevant contextual contingencies¹⁸ as possible. The faculty of **judgment** is “the faculty for the subsumption of the particular under the general,” but Kant’s salient clarification of this power (contextualized below) was his clear recognition that it manifests in at least two varieties: the *reflecting* and *determining*. The power of judgment is the faculty that is willing to make the call, so to speak, about how best to interpret the situation. These affairs are observed by the mind by way of the *senses* and through specific sense experiences. The mind organizes these experiences into concepts, which are understood in relation to one another and according to their purposive construction, and the moment of experiencing an array of sensory input data becomes a unified, experiential whole.¹⁹ Up to this point, everything is spontaneous—you do not need to command your eyes to receive photons when they are open, nor instruct your ears to pick up vibrations in the air. But the spontaneity ends there. Sensible intuitions may be “given” to us, but the concepts we use to describe them and arrange them into thoughts are not.

¹⁸ The key word here, however, is relevant—it is not reasonable to ask human beings to approach every day-to-day judgment as if they were a supercomputer running statistical models. The human mind homes in on what is materially and immediately meaningful; it does not need to sort, reason, and compare infinite possibilities to figure out which ones most likely matter.

¹⁹ In Kant’s language, the “original unity of apperception.” Kant explains the original unity of apperception primarily in the Critique of Pure Reason, specifically in the “Transcendental Deduction of the Categories” section. The concept is central to his argument that all experiences must be unified by a single, self-conscious “I” or subject, which he refers to as the “transcendental unity of apperception.” This unity is what allows us to synthesize different experiences into a coherent understanding of the world. See *CPR*, §§A95–A130. In the Second Edition (1787), the topic is further elaborated in §§B129–B169. Kant’s focus here is on how the self-consciousness of the subject, the “I think,” must accompany all representations for them to be considered as belonging to the same subject. This is what he refers to as the original unity of apperception.

Unpacking the role of judgment, determining or reflective, requires a firm grasp upon its relation to other faculties of thinking, including reason and understanding, the latter of which is defined in Kant's schema as "the faculty of the cognition of the general (of rules)." Unpacking what is meant by "common sense" requires engagement with its historical companion term—*sensus communis*—which most suitably translates to "sense of the community." *Sensus communis* refers to the kinds of immediate, non-reflective assessments we make in accordance with what we have been taught by our community and social milieu is right—in other words, *sensus communis* is often called "common knowledge." Kant describes *sensus communis* as follows:

"The common human understanding, which, as merely healthy (not yet cultivated) understanding, is regarded as the least that can be expected from anyone who lays claim to the name of a human being, thus has the unfortunate honor of being endowed with the name of common sense (*sensus communis*), and indeed in such a way that what is understood by the word **common** (not merely in our language, which here really contains an ambiguity, but in many others as well) comes to the same as the *vulgar*, which is encountered everywhere, to possess which is certainly not an advantage or an honor."²⁰

In unpacking this we must pay particular attention to the following terminology:

- **"...merely healthy (not yet cultivated)..."**: expressing an understanding that is not fundamentally defunct, but also not yet trained, strengthened, brought forth, grown, etc.—whatever verb you choose, the idea is the understanding has not yet grown to its full potential.

²⁰ CPJ 173.

- “...the unfortunate honor...common sense”: Kant is aware of the shortcomings of this particular phrase; I don’t see any other way to read this. Kant clearly does not mean “common sense” as the phrase is commonly used subsequently. He means common **understanding**, or *sensus communis*.
- “...common...vulgar...encountered everywhere”: this equivalence is important: Kant says explicitly, that the word “common” contains “ambiguity” not just in “our language” (German) but “in many others as well), but he is willing to boil it down, so to speak, to the word “vulgar,” meaning “found everywhere” (*not* “rude” or “coarse” as it is often interpreted).

The “common understanding” is a faculty of mind that allows for “cognition of the general,” in Kant’s terms, meaning a set of norms, principles, values, rules, etc. shared by a community and generally presumed by all of its members to be mostly known by almost everyone else. In the latter sense, ‘understanding’ is grounded on *what you have been taught*. Clearly, *sensus communis* is not identical with common sense as we would likely conceive of it. *Sensus communis* as common sense is largely (maybe even entirely) passive knowledge—it is received from and refined by the cultural milieu in which one lives. Further, it is *not* something given by a supersensible power or arrived at through disciplined argument about evidence. It is something that is learned, and sorting out its sources and motives is daunting. Real common sense cannot possibly consist of passively accepting anything claimed to be true based solely on established community standards. *Sapere aude*, even if not all there is to it, is still an indispensable formative element of it.

The Tripartite System of Thinking

Thinking is not merely the formation of an idea or concept in the mind; it is a complex mental process recognized through

comprehension, insight, and meaning. It does not automatically produce knowledge, nor does it reduce an object to a simple evaluation of "true" or "false." The outcome of thinking is shaped by significant elements, including images, concepts, propositions, experiences, and learned knowledge. These elements come together to form an intelligible insight, which we experience as a cohesive whole. In this sense, thinking is an ongoing process, not a static state. It is a process of discovery and decision-making that begins with observing a situation and proceeds by considering the implications of that situation. This involves evaluating variables that are significant to making a judgment about that situation. Although experience plays a crucial role, there is no foolproof method to ensure all relevant variables are considered.

When "thinking" is recognized as a *dynamic* process instead of a steady state, our inner sense of *time* as a constant progression is both necessary and universal. In Kant's mature view, our sense of time and space are not concepts so much as *a priori* structures of possible experience, without which we could not sustain any coherent view of what human experience is. It is not the mere occurrence of an idea or concept in one's mind; these are mental experiences encompassing images, concepts, propositions, and so forth. It is an ongoing cycle of contemplation and decision that initiates with an **understanding** of a situation, continues by **reasoning** through the various contingencies and consequences of that situation, and concludes with a judgment about the situation.

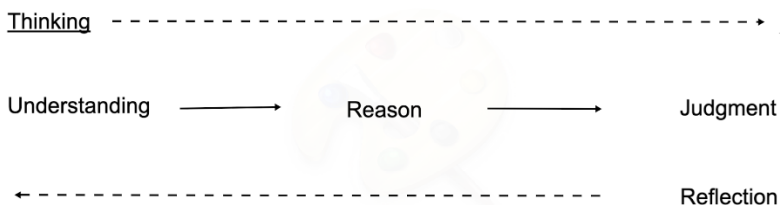
In the third *Critique*, Kant styles this the "**tripartite systemic representation of the faculty of thinking.**" Kant identifies three elements in this system: understanding, reason, and judgment. Preceding all of these, however, are the faculties of sensibility, which are spontaneous and provide the material upon which understanding operates. Sensibility is the origin of representations and feelings, without which the concept of "experience" would be impossible. The *a priori* forms of sensibility are space (outer sense) and time (inner

sense). Unlike sensibility, however, thinking is *not* spontaneous. The mind can wander aimlessly, but so too can it be consciously directed—this is what is meant by thinking. Thinking works *on* the materials provided by the faculties of sensibility, feeling, and emotion (which are all *aesthetic* considerations) as follows by way of three “powers” that together constitute the overall faculty of thinking. This “tripartite systemic representation of the faculty of thinking”²¹ consists of the following powers:

- **Understanding:** “The faculty of the cognition of the general (of rules).”
- **Reason:** “The faculty for the determination of the particular through the general (for the derivation from principles).”
- **Judgment:** “The faculty for the subsumption of the particular under the general.”

Thinking involves all three of these powers, consisting primarily in the active contemplation of how concepts meaningfully relate to one another. It begins with a particular **understanding** of how things generally are, progresses to **reasoning** about a situation and what it could mean (i.e., considering what caused the situation and what follows from it), and culminates in making a **judgment** about things.

²¹ *CPJ*, First Introduction, pp. 11-22. See Editor’s Introduction, xvi-xvii. Guyer’s extensive treatment of the close connection between imagination and understanding is particularly helpful and offers useful guidance in the extension of Kant’s view of the power of judgment in work after *CPR*.



Understanding refers to our capacity to comprehend how things function, how they are assembled, how they affect and influence each other, and so forth. It should be perceived in its dual role as both a verb in progressive tense (the mental action of understanding) and a noun (one's understanding of how things work). This encompasses a set of judgments one has already accepted as true. In other words, understanding refers to how one perceives the situation and the rules that dictate why it is the way it is.

Reason, as Kant treated it, is “the faculty for the determination of the particular through the general (from the derivation from principles).”²² However, this definition is not entirely satisfactory as it implies that all reasoning consists of the application of predetermined rules and contains nothing for the evaluation of the rules themselves. More accurately, within the overall schema, reasoning pertains to what follows. It considers patterns, possible causalities, various contingencies, and so on which we assess according to their relevance to intent. In this respect, the notion that one could arrive at “value-free” judgments misses an essential recognition of judgment as *normative*.

Organizing our sensible and aesthetic experiences into conscious order involves making innumerable judgments almost instantaneously—I must have concepts for trees and skies and clouds

²² Kant's full treatment of “reason” requires greater detail; those interested can see *CPR* 387-388, “Reason in General.”

and grass just to make sense of looking at a field, all of which must be acquired. Once learned, however, these concepts can be immediately—and seemingly, but not quite, intuitively—associated with the objects they correspond to. In other words, in familiar contexts, we can quickly determine what our experiences are. In Kant’s notion of the “determining judgment” we do arrive at strong but relative assurance that the judgment fits the situation. However, while we recognize most objects around us as neatly fitting into categories that we are already familiar with, we are sometimes (and not infrequently) confronted with objects or events in the world for which we do not immediately have a concept.

Reflective judgment assigns or forms a concept for a phenomenon that lacks a pre-established concept. This form of judgment is fundamental as it facilitates the formation, retention, and refinement of concepts. In fact, this realization prompted Kant to restructure his theory of judgment. The significance of this revision was so great that it necessitated moving beyond the critique of *pure* reason to *practical* reason in the second critique, and ultimately to aesthetic and teleological reason in the third critique. Treating the third critique as solely about “art” misses Kant’s major point: both the aesthetic and the teleological aspects jointly address reflecting judgment as a faculty directly related to purposiveness. Purposiveness is the principle by which an object, event, or situation is evaluated to assess how to form a concept of that thing. It differs from purpose, which refers to the *raison d’être* or the specific reason for a particular thing’s existence. In contrast, purposiveness is a philosophical principle suggesting that considering a thing’s purpose is the primary method of determining its essence, rather than focusing simply on the form or arrangement.

Reflective judgment unfolds in two pivotal stages. The first involves revisiting our existing knowledge reservoir to comprehend this novel entity. Reflection, in this context, is the process of evaluating and ultimately judging one’s own thoughts, knowledge, and experiences. Kant posits that to reflect is to consider, not just what an

object *is*, but what it *does*—and *to what end*? The second stage, accordingly, when tasked with making a reflective judgment, involves discerning the nature of the object by contemplating its potential purpose, or “purposiveness”. The principle of purposiveness, or the consideration of an object’s appearance to us vis-à-vis what that appearance suggests the object could possibly be *for*, is the *a priori* principle according to which we form concepts by way of the power of reflective judgment. The process of conceptualizing an object also necessarily involves considering the conditions under which such an object could be created or constituted. In other words, forming a concept of a sensible object is contingent upon the concept encapsulating the foundation of the object’s reality, which is its purpose or end.²³ The next chapter considers the kinds of purposiveness that inform the exercise of sound judgment and common sense.

²³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 68; 180-181.

3. *Sentio Ergo Sum*: I Feel, Therefore I Am

*You gentlemen who think you have a mission
To purge us of the seven deadly sins
Should first sort out the basic food position
Then start your preaching, that's where it begins.*

*You lot who preach restraint and watch your waist as well
Should learn, for once, the way the world is run
However much you twist or whatever lies that you tell
Food is the first thing morals follow on.*

*So first, make sure that those who are now starving
Get proper helpings when we all start carving!*

—BRECHT & WEILL²⁴

In the 1977 film *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen—very thinly veiled as the fictional Alvy Singer—delivers a joke that became one of Allen's memorable one-liners, even if it wasn't among his best. Speaking at a fundraiser for the McGovern campaign (God help him), Allen ingratiates himself with the liberal intellectual crowd—the sort you would expect at a George McGovern campaign event in New York in 1972—with the following joke: “I was thrown out of NYU my

²⁴ Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, “What Keeps Mankind Alive?” in *The Threepenny Opera*, trans. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 54–55.

freshman year for cheating on my metaphysics final. Y’know, I looked into the soul of the boy sitting next to me.”²⁵

Now, there’s plenty to criticize Woody Allen for,²⁶ so I’m not breaking new ground by adding to the list, but here goes all the same: this joke is awful. In the film, the NYU crowd laughs uproariously at Alvy’s zinger about metaphysics, prompting us, the audience, to accept that this joke was genuinely funny enough to make the crowd burst into laughter. But that is just an effect of Allen’s script, in which his fictional audience assumes, like he apparently does, that “metaphysics” refers to some nebulous, non-corporeal quasi-reality that supersedes our own. In Allen’s fiction, he assumes his audience shares his understanding of the word’s meaning—after all, they are products of his imagination. Therefore, even if this joke were effective (and let’s be clear, it isn’t), it would rely on misconstruing the word “metaphysics” entirely. Determining whether it’s funny at all (and it’s not) involves understanding what ‘metaphysics’ really means. So, let’s start there.

It has been the general practice of philosophers to assume that the starting point in constructing genuine knowledge of the world is a strong theory of **metaphysics**. The word “metaphysics” itself, however, presents its own set of problems. The Byzantine Greek *μεταφυσικά*, itself derived from *μετὰ τὰ φυσικά* (*metà tà phusiká*), or “after the natural,” traces its origin to a 1st century compilation of notes by Aristotle intended to succeed *Physics*; this compilation is the treatise

²⁵ Woody Allen, dir., *Annie Hall* (Los Angeles: United Artists, 1977).

²⁶ In truth, I have to confess that there are some Woody Allen movies that I think are truly wonderful, and I might even go so far as to say they were formative for me. *Annie Hall* is one of them, but I could list a few more. The *Purple Rose of Cairo* stands out, as does *Sleeper*, which is quite funny, and there are a lot of good things to say about *Love and Death*, which is likely my favorite work of his. But I feel like I reached a point of emotional maturity around the age of 28 or 29 that I don’t think Mr. Allen ever actualized, and that has curtailed much of my continued interest in his work going into middle age.

we now call *Metaphysics*, literally “*after* the physics.”²⁷ The implication of the editorial design is that, while metaphysics consists of “first principles,” they can only be studied *after* a relatively full understanding of the natural world as it is. As such, the term “metaphysics” would concern itself with the highest possible levels of **generalization** (the attempt being to generalize to the point of having **universal rules**). In the Western philosophical canon, the history of this idea is inseparable from Plato’s theory of “forms,” which, although later all but abandoned by the philosopher and further rebuked by his intellectual descendant, Aristotle, has nevertheless retained staying power through the centuries by way of Aquinas’s serious misreading of the very incomplete editions of ancient Greek texts to which he had access.²⁸

But the reliability of texts at Aquinas’ disposal may not have ultimately made much difference in this regard. By the time of Aquinas’s writing in the 13th century, European intellectual culture was so inculcated with Catholic dogmatism that it was all but a foregone conclusion that any philosophy developed within its traditions would be built on metaphysical first principles. For Aquinas, there never was any possibility that his articulation of metaphysical causes and structures would not come back to God; and Descartes, devout Catholic that he was, likely never stood a chance of directing his philosophy of mind toward anything but the Almighty, assuming God to be the source of concepts that could be apprehended by the mind and

²⁷ The Greek title of Aristotle’s “Physics” is Φυσικὴ ἀκρόασις (*physikē akroasis*), which translates to “Lectures on Nature,” or “Hearings on Nature.” The work is a collection of texts that address various aspects of the natural world and formed a foundational part of Aristotle’s scientific inquiry.

²⁸ The first comprehensive Greek text of Plato’s dialogues, by Aldus Manutius, was published in Venice in 1513. See Jill Kraye, “The Printing History of Aristotle in the Fifteenth Century: A Bibliographical Approach to Renaissance Philosophy,” *Renaissance Studies* 9, no. 2 (1995): 189–211.

failing to recognize that the concepts we carry in our minds can only be formed through a series of **reflective judgments**.

This misinterpretation traces itself back to Plato and his ideal forms, which represented his attempt to map the mathematical harmony of Pythagoras's work onto the cosmos writ large. As has been argued elsewhere, the West's ongoing fixation on this aspect of Plato's thought stems from a poor understanding of the chronology of Plato's work and a general lack of awareness of his own substantial self-critique in the later dialogues and in Aristotle. The primacy of Plato among the scholastics, however—owed in no small part to the ease of mapping his universal oneness onto a developing Christian theology—is derived more consciously from this aspect of Greek philosophical thought than any other. Thus, the traditional assumption in the order of reasoning, following early Plato and his subsequent interpreters, was that a “strong metaphysics” (which, in this context, had come to mean “theory of reality” in actual practice) must be in place for practical reasoning to occur. From a solid metaphysics, one could successfully construct a logic in keeping with that reality, which could structure a successful ethical thought, which could then ensure the good: in more spartan language, this is the view in which the metaphysical is considered the grounding of the logical, the logical the grounding of the ethical, and the ethical the grounding of the aesthetic; ultimately the thought is that the metaphysical (the generalized rule structure) is the *grounding of reasoning*. It is a mistake, however, to assume that logical considerations form the foundation—which is to say, the thing that all the others rest **upon**—of thought. Others, notably including Peirce, have argued that this is not the case. To believe that logical considerations must precede or be satisfied before aesthetic considerations is to fundamentally misunderstand the role of what Peirce designated ‘normative sciences’—Logic, Ethics, and

Aesthetics²⁹—in what people are doing when they think through any problem.

There is a tacit assumption that one can hold oneself to the standard of “thinking logically” so as to avoid “clouding” one’s judgment, as it is commonly said, with such matters as one’s personal feelings when making a judgment. And while it is the case that rash decision-making in a moment of passionate intensity is likely to elicit poor judgment, it is also the case that, even at our coolest and most level-headed, our decisions are still weighed against our understanding of how it will affect the desired ends. To believe that logical considerations always precede, or must be satisfied before, aesthetic ones is a fundamental misapprehension of what transpires when individuals tackle problems cognitively. The belief, though tacit, is that adhering strictly to the standards of “logical thinking” can somehow insulate our judgments from the perceived banality and bias of feelings, even going so far as to reject altogether the idea that feelings or emotions are pertinent at all.

Yet nothing could be more pertinent in human affairs. Placing logic at the foundation of cognitive activity neglects to acknowledge that our desire for satisfaction—an inherent drive derived from the Latin *satis*, meaning “enough” or “sufficient,” and *facio*, meaning “to make” or “construct”—is the motivating force behind all human affairs. The bedrock of our conscious reality as humans is not founded on a *logical* metaphysical framework, but on an *aesthetic* one. The term “aesthetic” itself stems from the Ancient Greek αἰσθητικός (*aisthētikós*), “of sense perception,” from αἰσθάνομαι (*aisthánomai*), “*I feel*.” These perceptions are not trivial—they range from base animalistic impulses, like the feeling of hunger or the fear of pain, to utterly cool-headed assessments concerning finance and

²⁹ Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 1, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), 5.191.

infrastructure. In all instances, the material decisions that follow from any scenario are fundamentally shaped by somebody's needs or wants—what really matters is *whose*.

Contrary to the assumption that once we possess a metaphysical framework, we can “logically” interpret the reality around us, this is not how thinking truly proceeds from our experiences to our judgments about them. Instead, the crux of our conscious reality is fundamentally shaped by our aesthetic experiences—which is to say, our sense of the world around us, our inner being, and our assessment of their relative goodness or badness. In this sense, such considerations are *normative*. Everything we do, think, or strive for is evaluated against how it suits our needs, desires, and sense of what is right. In other words, it is not an exaggeration to say that not only do our feelings and emotions *matter* to logical intellectual discourse, but they also fundamentally inform the entire enterprise and provide the living rubric of success.

For this we find useful guidance in the American logician and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who, following Kant, developed this core reorientation of intellectual priorities as he pursued a comprehensive study on the science of logic. Peirce contended³⁰ that ethics, which fundamentally depend on aesthetics, underpins logic, writing: “Ethics depends upon esthetics; we cannot know how we are deliberately prepared to aim to behave until we know what we deliberately admire... Logic in its turn essentially depends upon ethics (as I showed, in a general and vaguer way in 1869, [162] *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, II, 207-208), but its methods of reasoning must be mathematical...” Elsewhere, as was his habit, Peirce rearticulated his point: “Having analyzed the nature of the precise problems of the three, and given some considerations generally overlooked, I show that

³⁰ See Peirce and Joseph Randall ed., *Logic, Considered as Semeiotic: An Overview of Charles Peirce's Philosophical Logic*, constructed from Manuscript L75, Final Version - MS L75.358. (Draft E - MS L75.161-162).

ethics depends essentially upon [a]esthetics and logic upon ethics. The latter dependence I had shown less fully in 1869. (*Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. II, pp. 297 et seq.) But the methods of reasoning by which the truths of logic are established must be mathematical, such reasoning alone being evident independently of any logical doctrine.”³¹

It is this perception of what we feel that directs our thought processes and, ultimately, our actions. In this context, the conception of what is deemed “good” emerges from the feelings of pleasure and satisfaction associated with fulfilling a need or desire—an aesthetic judgment. Ethics then involves the contemplation of what is generally considered “good,” which is predicated on our personal conception of a satisfying experience. Logic, in turn, represents the mathematical reasoning necessary to use our intellectual energies to either establish what we think is good or to work toward manifesting realities we deem good. Finally, metaphysics is conceived as the zenith because it should align with everything that precedes it; any viable metaphysics should accord with what lived reality truly is.

But the inherent and inevitable issue lies in the fact that lived experience is filled with contingencies—random, unpredictable, and uncontrolled events or factors—contradicting the assertion that metaphysics, with its generalized approach, can account for every possible situation. Therefore, grounding our thinking on a strong *a priori* metaphysics—a metaphysics assumed to be applicable before any empirical assessment—often becomes unworkable in many real-world scenarios. Building on Peirce’s ideas about the normative sciences—ethics, aesthetics, and logic—he posited that logic is the discipline of how we **ought to think** if we are to have any possibility of assessing the truth or falsehood of any proposition.³² Ethics,

³¹ Peirce, MS L75 Final Draft, 359-361.

³² CP 5.121, 1903.

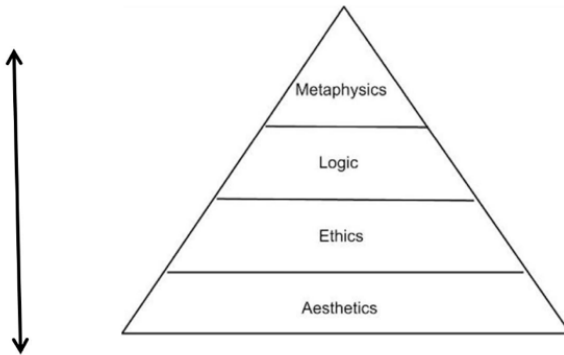
according to Peirce,³³ is the study of the ends of action we deliberately choose to adopt. Aesthetics is the exploration of what makes an ideal admirable.³⁴

From this perspective, it becomes evident that aesthetics constitutes the foundational layer of the edifice of thought. It is the aesthetic judgment that decides what experiences we consider valuable or satisfying. Ethics then proceeds from aesthetics, setting the standards for actions that are most likely to realize the admirable ideals established by aesthetics. Only then does logic come into play, providing us with the tools to best achieve these ethically delineated ends—our desire being to think best in accordance with what is true, which we judge to be a virtuous desire. In this sense, the essence of our decision-making **begins and ends with the consideration of the aesthetic**. This understanding of the normative sciences reflects that logic is not a self-contained system independent of other forms of cognition. It is contingent upon the contexts provided by an ethics that considers the aesthetic concerns of the situation at hand and what follows from them. It is guided by the standards set forth by these disciplines. The notion that logic can operate independently of these other dimensions of thought is, considering this perspective, untenable. Logic, instead of standing alone, is deeply intertwined with and dependent on our values and our perceptions of the world.

³³ *CP* 5.130, 1903.

³⁴ *CP* 5.36, 1902.

THEORY: Zero Contingencies (purely ideal, does not appear to exist in real life)



EXPERIENCE: High contingency (most of human life)

While this discussion may seem to downplay the importance of logic in human cognition, this is not the case. Logic is undoubtedly integral to any sincere appraisal of the world; it forms the structure of rational thought and action. We understand logic as a critical examination of the patterns that reality seems to most closely adhere to. It may not be infallible, but it continually strives for an approximation of the truth as close as possible to the actual state of things. It is crucial to dispel the notion that rational agents engage in logical reasoning for its own sake. Logic does not exist in a vacuum; its purpose is not self-contained. Instead, logical action serves to further certain ends and goals.

Now, what all this has to do with “common sense”—and, likewise, with the faculty of judgment—is the endlessly difficult problem of finding common satisfaction. The idea that all people in any community can be satisfied in all desires is absurd; when a person’s needs and wants are consistently met without hassle, they will soon find new and more exotic things to want. Conversely, it is undeniable that all human beings do share a few common needs: clean water, food, and reliable shelter being the most basic for our survival. Other needs such

as healthy personal relationships, social acceptance, and self-actualization, are not immediately applicable to day-to-day survival and, likewise, their level of true “necessity” is debatable. Thus, the challenge, particularly when contemplating a universally shared “common sense” among *homo sapiens*, lies in considering what kinds of human satisfaction we consider to be truly necessary, indispensable, and owed to one another for our species and civilization to carry on.

Interlude

Since I was a teacher when I began this project, I thought about it in terms of how to teach it. How would I make sense of it to a student? To do that, you have to know the material inside and out, anticipate any questions a student might have, get your pride down when they ask you one that you didn't see coming, and then hurry off to a library to find more books on the subject. Fortunately, I found that the study of common sense and the practice of reading literature have almost everything in common, but maybe not in ways we'd immediately suspect.

I was tempted in the beginning, as are many literary critics and humanists, to find some way to formalize a 'critical' reading of literary texts, to say one in which all the fine particulars of the text fit neatly into an established 'theoretical' framework. This is what is generally considered *en vogue* in university humanities today: we all adopt a certain critical, typically ideologically driven view, almost always one that takes umbrage with the status quo, and then explain to our readers why the novel, poem, or play we've chosen to analyze fits neatly into our preferred critical viewpoint. The 'theory' refers to whatever system of argument a scholar has chosen as their preferred toolkit. The Marxists, of course, would always apply Marx, and where they couldn't apply Marx, they would apply post-Marxism, and wherever that wouldn't work, they'd pull out neo-Marxism. Foucauldian theorists, of course, knelt at the altar of Foucault, who had written voluminously to show them that all aspects of society were merely tools of social control—whether by brainwashing, coercion, imprisonment, outright force, social conditioning, or cultural hegemony. Being made wise by his liberating work, they went on to see things mostly his way in all matters. Deconstructionists came close to denying that words have any meaning at all, and a whole swath of academics since the 1980s have each devoted themselves entirely to some variety of gender studies, critical race theory, postcolonialism, queer studies, disability studies,

or one of the many other specializations in marginalized communities that, usually in good faith, intend to advance something like justice and progress for people who historically have been denied both and often abused and exploited without recourse, but often missed the forest for the trees and got lost in the process. Worst of all, though, is probably postmodernism in general, which, in my view, is tantamount to intellectual nihilism.

None of these approaches has room for anything that we think of as common sense. However morally pure, strict adherence to certain moral, political, cultural, or economic ideologies usually just isn't workable. Common sense involves directly handling the minute particulars of living in the world, and these decisions, of which we make dozens every day, simply do not snap to any ideological grid in real time. We are also often faced with moral dilemmas, including those where our own well-being, that of our families, or those in our care come into conflict with, or at least don't entirely align with, our chosen ideological framework. These are the kinds of moments and decisions that the rest of this book is concerned with.

Therefore, aside from some light editing for readability, the following two chapters are presented much as they originally appeared. This is for several reasons, the first being to illustrate an approach to literary criticism where the text is prioritized over the theory. If the theory doesn't apply, it isn't used. The language in this section is intentionally formal, adhering to the conventions of academic writing. There is no room for irony in academic writing, no space for humor. The presence of one joke in a text suggests there may be more, which is unsuitable for a work intended for straightforward exposition throughout.

In the classroom, this imaginative space fosters meaningful discussions and allows students to dissect the circumstances and choices of literary figures. As readers, we can weigh various outcomes, consider alternative paths, and ultimately develop a deeper understanding of human behavior. This practice not only enhances our

appreciation of the text, but it also refines our own sense of judgment. The study of literature offers a unique opportunity to explore practical, common-sense decisions in a low-stakes environment, similar to Aristotle's approach to teaching virtue. Just as Aristotle advocated practicing virtue in controlled settings to prepare for high-stakes situations, literature allows us to examine the intricate dilemmas characters face. These situations often carry significant consequences within the narrative, yet they pose no risk to the readers.

Common sense—itself a virtue by any standard—is cultivated through exposure, reflection, and engagement with diverse scenarios. By bringing textual elements into focus, we sharpen our ability to make sound decisions when confronted with real-life challenges. As Aristotle suggested, this essential faculty is nurtured through practice, equipping us with the tools to navigate the complexities of the world with wisdom and discernment.

To engage in common sense is to exercise judgment regarding desirable outcomes and to take the necessary steps toward realizing them. This process demands a foundational knowledge of cause-and-effect mechanisms, along with the discernment to know when to abstain from action due to insufficient understanding. Determining what constitutes a desirable outcome involves recognizing the potential emotional implications for all parties concerned. It requires answering a series of questions: How will my decision affect the happiness or dissatisfaction of everyone involved? Does their emotional state matter to me? Whom do I specifically wish to benefit from my decision? What are the repercussions of the decision? These are fundamentally aesthetic and reflective judgments.

While logical reasoning is an essential component of common sense, it should not be misconstrued as the sole consideration. Logic, devoid of personal motivations such as 'want' or 'desire,' serves as a sterile tool for problem-solving and decision-making. It may guide our thought processes, planning, and execution, but the goal invariably gravitates toward satisfaction—a sentiment rather than an axiom or a

natural law. Thus, establishing genuine common-sense values is an exploratory undertaking that requires delving into our thoughts, reactions, and aesthetic feelings. This process can be most effectively navigated through collective engagement with a common text.

A text, in its manifold capacity, serves as a platform for shared imaginative speculation. It invites us to entertain hypothetical scenarios and possibilities by asking questions such as ‘What if [a] were to happen under conditions [x, y, and z]?’ This collective exercise not only facilitates the understanding of others’ perspectives but also cultivates empathy and critical thought, the bedrock of common sense. Importantly, a text provides a solid foundation for such shared reflections. This isn’t in the sense of interpretation—literature is, after all, a fertile ground for multiple, often diverging readings. However, when we refer to the words themselves, their order, and their basic elements, there can be no argument. For instance, we can endlessly debate the symbolism and implications of Shakespeare’s line, ‘Juliet is the sun,’ but we cannot dispute that the characters J-U-L-I-E-T I-S T-H-E S-U-N appear precisely in that order. Nor can we deny that these letters form the words they do without revealing a fundamental lack of understanding of the language.

In this light, a text transcends its status as a passive collection of words and becomes a shared, objective reality—a starting point for fruitful discussions and the exchange of ideas. It provides tangible common ground that fosters the development of mutual understanding and consensus-building, which are key facets of the practice of common sense. Consequently, exploring the mental and emotional landscapes elicited by a common text can facilitate the establishment of common-sense values in a community or society.

4. “All Right, Then, I’ll Go to Hell!”: Common Sense and *Sensus Communis* in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

That which is hateful to you, do not do to another. That is the whole of the Law (Torah); the rest is explanation. Go and learn.

—HILLEL³⁵

If only one character in all of American literature had a lick of common sense, it would easily be Mark Twain’s most beloved, iconic, and controversial creation—the feral, backwoods adolescent Huckleberry Finn. Billed as “Tom Sawyer’s comrade,” Huck Finn was first introduced to readers in chapter six of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as “the juvenile pariah of the village... son of the town drunkard... cordially hated and dreaded by all the mothers of the town, because he was idle, and lawless, and vulgar and bad—and because all their children admired him so...”³⁶ Huck Finn likes to smoke and cuss; he dislikes fine clothing and Bible study and prefers his food all cooked together so that “things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and the things go better.”³⁷ He is a lover of nature and distrusts all things ‘sivilized’—religion, education, money, and above all, grown-ups, who demonstrate to Huck time and time again that there are absolutely no limits to what people will do for money.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has rankled the sensibilities of “respectable” readers since its debut in 1885, not because of the sheer volume of cruel and depraved acts that Huck bears witness to, but

³⁵ Talmud, Shabbat 31a. See Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, Koren-Steinsaltz Talmud, 1965—.

³⁶ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, edited by Beverly Lyon Clark, W.W. Norton & Co., p. 40.

³⁷ Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, edited by Victor Fischer, Harriet Elinor Smith, et. al. University of California Press, 2010.

because the target of its satire is precisely the polite society so offended by it. Published by a shell company operated by Twain's nephew,³⁸ *Huck Finn* has been enraging audiences from the very beginning, starting with the Concord Public Library famously banning the book right from the outset for its "coarse language" and "irreligious" themes. Considered crude, vulgar, and offensive in its time, *Huck Finn* was a wild success, as Twain himself predicted it would be. "They have expelled Huck from their library as 'trash and suitable only for the slums,'" he wrote the same nephew that year: "That will sell 25,000 copies for us sure."³⁹ Of course, Twain's *magnum opus* is still considered crude, vulgar, and offensive in our time, but from an entirely upended perspective. Easily identifiable as a work of antiracist satire by the standards of its own time (an inflammatory achievement in its own right), many readers in the 21st century find themselves deeply uncomfortable with, if not pained by, its liberal deployment of racist language and demeaning stereotypes. As such, teaching *Huckleberry Finn* to any group of students in the present day is difficult—and possibly injudicious, depending on the approach taken—to the extent that many faculty and administrators find it better to just avoid it altogether.

And this is deeply regrettable, for despite the novel's problematic complexities, *Huckleberry Finn*'s general exclusion from the classroom is a huge loss to American literary education, particularly vis-à-vis the study of common sense. For, satire that it is, *Huckleberry Finn*'s entire project is to hold up the *sensus communis* of the American South⁴⁰ for sustained examination while mapping it against the day-to-

³⁸ See *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, vol. 2, ed. Harriet E. Smith, Victor Fischer, et al. (University of California Press, 2013), 57-59.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ The opening of the novel is set in Missouri, which can open debates regarding its classification as part of the Southern United States. While Missouri's position was and still is liminal, certain historical contexts should be acknowledged. Missouri was a slave state, occupied an important geographical at the nexus of the Mississippi River and the frontier, and was home to many

day experiences of those who inhabited it, not only in 1885 but in the centuries that followed. He does so through the eyes of a dispossessed adolescent who, through the central conceit of being “accepted” into Tom Sawyer’s family—his proxy “acceptance” into proper society—is able to engage in powerful criticisms of race and class simply by viewing this world from the perspective of someone as low in the social order as he is.

Another problem in dealing with *Huck Finn* is that it is messy. It is far from an easily categorized narrative that fits neatly within any of its contemporaneous worldviews. This can come as a surprise to a first-time reader who, expecting a straightforward, traditionally structured children’s narrative, instead finds a meandering exploration of the human condition, class, race, society, and moral responsibility, while also veering off into both comic vignettes and tragic episodes from the perspective of a child who, though wise beyond his years, is still just a boy. To the adolescent reader, Twain’s story is a knowing wink from the one adult in the room who subtly signals that they are not wrong to wonder if something is dreadfully wrong with grown-up affairs; to the adult reader (which, in the context of Twain’s contemporaneous audiences, mostly meant white American—specifically Southern—men), it is a prompt to ask oneself, in a very concrete and practical sense, how—or even if—one can live a life that is not fundamentally amoral while simultaneously participating, at any level, in a society whose entire economy, culture, and infrastructure is built on a foundation of brutality and violent exploitation.

Like its subject matter, *Huck Finn* is full of contradictions and is *not* intended to be taken as a clean-cut “theoretical” text with a consistent, discernable interpretation. It not only violates the

Confederate sympathizers. But Missouri did not secede from the Union. Combine this with the fact that Jim and Huck’s journey is predominantly downriver, the collective sentiment portrayed in the novel can be confidently characterized as quintessentially Southern.

Aristotelian ideals of the unified whole⁴¹ at every turn, but it actively instructs the reader to think outside of them. At the time of writing *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain was an experienced literary figure at the height of his powers who, having already found success and fame by the time of writing his magnum opus, was unusually well-versed in the art of fielding audience expectations, reactions, and prejudices. As such, he knew perfectly well that he could not trust readers to see what he doing in such a complex satire parading as children's literature. Furthermore, Twain knew that some readers simply have neither an ear nor an eye for irony. Therefore, Twain clearly communicates to his reader in the "NOTICE" that precedes the narrative by invoking a tactic that, by 1885, was very well known to the average white man in the South—he threatens them:

NOTICE

Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR
PER G. G., CHIEF OF ORDNANCE⁴²

⁴¹ The principles discussed pertain predominantly to tragedy, as evidenced by the extant sections of Aristotle's "Poetics." Cf. Aristotle, *XXIII Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932). It remains speculative, however, if his hypothesized treatise on comedy — which has unfortunately been lost to history — might have posited that the essence of comedy is rooted in chaos, drawing parallels to the anarchic comedy of the Marx Brothers or Bugs Bunny.

⁴² It has been remarked that the martial tone of the book's "NOTICE" would have been recognizable to white southerners as reminiscent of the many such notices forbidding uncondoned activity on pain of punishment. These were usually "signed" by a military officer and were common throughout the South during Reconstruction, when northern troops still occupied much of the former Confederacy (see Victor Doyne, "Presentations of Violence in 'Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,'" *Mark Twain Annual*, no. 2, 2004, p. 76).

Twain's draconian "NOTICE" is more than a grim joke to set the mood, although it does that reasonably well. Instead, by rather firmly directing the reader *not* to rely on commonplace tropes for interpreting the novel, Twain forces us to ask questions about what the purpose of the work could be in its stead. Does he mean there is no motive, moral, or plot within its pages, or is this simply another ironic wink? Is he suggesting the reader is endangering themselves by thinking too much about what they are about to read? In Twain's world, both interpretations might be valid: it is difficult to articulate any workable moral theory in a society that allows slavery, and questioning authority or hierarchy in the antebellum South was indeed punishable by corporal methods, regardless of race.⁴³ In any case, it is clear from this notice that Twain is deliberately signaling to the reader that what follows is not a conventional narrative. Attempts to interpret it as such are not just wrong-headed, but dangerous.

So, what is Twain's purpose in composing *Huck Finn* as he did? His primary purpose is to construct a satire of the highest order. A 'sequel' of sorts to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*—a third-person narrative of a conventional adventure story—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is narrated from the first-person perspective of the first novel's sidekick, a barely literate child living on the very edges of society. Satire is among the most delicate of genres, juggling the subtle distinctions between parody, homage, and insult without fully committing to any one. But this is not just any satire—it is distinctly American, directly confronting the nation's cardinal sin and the foundation of its outsized prosperity: the brutal practice of chattel slavery.

⁴⁴ The network of laws and punishments under this heading could comprise, in effect, a practical outlining of the *sensus communis* of the American antebellum South, as enforced by a pervasive system of punishments intented to maintain the institutions of slavery.

Another purpose Twain clearly has in mind is to imagine a space for meaningful conversation between black and white people in the antebellum South. As a thought experiment, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* postulates a scenario that would have been all but impossible in the South of Twain's upbringing—what would happen if a twelve-year-old white boy and a runaway black man were given the space to talk freely with one another? What would they talk about? How would they understand their relationship to one another without the gaze of white, slave-owning society constantly upon them, sizing them up for judgment and punishment? Outside of social expectations, each sees the other as a friend. While both are unmoored from their “place” in society with no intent of returning, Twain further equalizes Jim and Huck by drawing them nearer to one another in the social hierarchy. Jim is held in high regard among his fellow slaves for his escapades with witches to the point of pride (“Jim was monstrous proud about it, and he got so he wouldn’t hardly notice the other n—rs. N—rs would come miles to hear Jim tell about it, and he was more looked up to than any n—r in that country”⁴⁴), while Huck, poor white trash that he is, is about as low in the social order that a white person can be—and a child, to boot. By placing Huck and Jim as close to one another in the social hierarchy as a black person and white person can be—and then allowing them the space to consciously reject that hierarchy without fear—Twain creates the space for the kinds of critical conversations that social justice advocates so often call for. The irony that Twain observed, of course, is that such critical conversations can rarely take place in the formal proceedings of a conference: they unfold on the river and beneath the stars.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is all at once—depending on who one asks—a picaresque coming-of-age tale, an antislavery narrative, a blistering satire, a racist screed, a sociopolitical allegory concerning the

⁴⁴ HF 7-8.

failure of Reconstruction, a blasphemous heresy, a runaway bestseller, or even a so-called “Great American Novel.” First and foremost, however, it is a children’s book. Like Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a work of “children’s” literature that is accessible early in life and only grows richer with age and reflection. Huck’s tone may be light and cavalier a good portion of the time, but his predicament is constantly one that is fraught on all sides with profound peril. “By & by I shall take a boy of twelve & run him on through life (in the first person) but not Tom Sawyer—he would not be a good character for it,” Twain wrote to W.D. Howells in 1876.⁴⁵ If by “run him on through life,” Twain meant to subject him to an infinite variety of horrors on a grueling and hopeless journey to nowhere, he could not have succeeded more brilliantly than he did with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Why it could not have been Tom Sawyer will become clear as we proceed, but it is enough at this point to say that only a child with quick wits and good judgment—which is to say, with common sense—could survive any one of life-threatening situations Huck faces throughout the novel, let alone all of them.

Being “Sivilized”: *Sensus Communis* in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Huckleberry Finn is taken here as the preeminent text on what it means (and why it is important) **to question the *sensus communis*** up to and including the consideration of whether it must be rejected altogether. The core tension, as presented early in the novel, is that between the backwoods Huckleberry Finn and the fine surroundings he

⁴⁵ Mark Twain-Howells Letters: The Correspondence of Samuel L. Clemens and William D. Howells, edited by Henry Nash Smith, Harvard University Press, 1960, vol. 1, pp. 91-92.

finds himself in at the novel's outset. Huck, who until his recent escapades with Tom Sawyer resulted in a sudden elevation in social status, had slept in a sugar-hogshead⁴⁶ and lived off the land. Now, he finds himself almost literally trapped among the material details of fine living as he attempts to navigate life in the Widow Douglas's household. The widow has a lot of rules, mostly all having to do with communal notions of what is and is not proper. Propriety is what matters in the South. Those who are proper treasure their elite status; those who are not either long for it or consign themselves to a "low-down and ornery" standard of living (see Pap, Boggs, the Arkansaw chaw-swappers, the king and the duke, and more).

Huck, being of the "low-down and ornery" stock, has not been brought up in the ways of the upper-crust St. Petersburg society. As a foil to Tom Sawyer, who is deeply entrenched in the *sensus communis*

⁴⁶ A large barrel used for shipping raw goods. The parallel to Diogenes of Sinope cannot be overstated; the eminent pre-Socratic philosopher and principal founder of cynicism as a philosophical school was famed for his disdain of contemporary mores, arbitrary customs, material wealth, and social propriety. He was famous for taking shelter in a large clay wine jar in the Acropolis and for expressing contempt at convention. He was possibly a fugitive, as well; his father, Hicesias, was a banker who became embroiled in a currency debasement scandal that saw him and his son exiled from Sinope and stripped of their possessions. It is not known if Diogenes was an accomplice in his father's scheme, but he rejected the idea of money for the rest of his life. His meeting with Alexander the Great was memorialized thusly by Plutarch: XIV. A conference of Greeks was held at the Isthmus of Corinth, and it was decided to join Alexander in his expedition against the Persians. The King was appointed commander-in-chief. Many statesmen and philosophers waited upon him to tender their congratulations, and Alexander expected that Diogenes of Sinope, who was staying at Corinth, would do the same. Since, however, that remarkable philosopher, taking very small account of Alexander, remained quietly in the Craneium, the King went in person to see him. Diogenes happened to be lying in the sunshine, and when he saw so great a crowd approaching sat up a little and stared at Alexander. The King greeted him and addressed him, inquiring if he had need of anything. "Just stand a little out of the sunshine," replied Diogenes. Alexander, it is said, was so impressed by this reply, and so filled with admiration at the contemptuous manner in which he had been treated, and at the magnanimity of the philosopher, that, as they went away and his courtiers were laughing and jesting over the circumstance, he remarked: "Seriously, if I were not Alexander, I would have been Diogenes." See Plutarch, *The Life of Alexander*, translated by W.R. Frazer. Loeb Classical Library, volume 7, 1919, 16; See also William Desmond, *Cynics*. University of California Press, 2008, 21.

of his upbringing, Huck is unburdened by expectations of propriety, which allows him to view societal norms with a critical eye. In material terms, Huck's background is very different from Tom's—he is not just poor but impoverished. He is only barely above a free black man in terms of social standing: his youth places him even further down the social ranks than even adult white trash, but even as child, Huck's social rank outstrips Jim's simply by being a white. Yet unlike those around him, Huck has little interest in—if not outright disdain for—the fundamental pillars of Southern gentility: religion, schooling, and money.

No cultural institution in the South is more important than the Christian religion. Likewise, landed interests in the antebellum South had to “reconcile” the teachings of Jesus with the institution of slavery. Thus, the pulpit served as a powerful platform for the propagation of a racial hierarchy undergirded by a selective interpretation of Christian scripture. Sermons of the time often sought to “reconcile” the moral dissonance between the Christian ideals of love and equality and the brutal reality of slavery, but in practice this “reconciliation” simply meant justifying the practice to parishioners, week after week, from the pulpit. Certain Bible passages that “condone” the practice were emphasized, including Ephesians 6:5 (“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ”) and Titus 2:9-10 (“Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.”)

These sermons, steeped in this interpretive tradition, served to assuage the moral qualms of the white populace, offering a comforting narrative that slavery was not a product of human greed or cruelty but a divine decree, a part of the natural order ordained by God Himself. This narrative was so pervasive that it seeped into the familial sphere, shaping the beliefs of generations. Huck, having not been brought up

in a family of social import and, therefore, unchurched, is learning much of the scripture at an age where he has developed some critical faculties. He is also suspicious of religion, if not quite at Twain's level of cynicism on the subject. He is not interested in scripture and does not see its relevance to his own life:

After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers, and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by and by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him, because I don't take no stock in dead people.⁴⁷

Huck's skepticism also extends to the efficacy of prayer. He retreats into the woods to contemplate the disparity between the promises of prayer and the harsh realities of life. He questions why prayer doesn't seem to solve tangible problems. The widow's explanation that prayer yields "spiritual gifts" only confounds Huck further. He is told that he must help others, prioritize their needs over his own—a concept whose advantage he struggles to see, except for the benefit of others. This does not satisfy Huck—even though, ironically, it is the very moral instruction he follows later in the novel when he decides he would sooner risk hellfire than betray Jim. At this point in the novel, however, Huck is willing to push back, again revealing his disregard for status and propriety. This scene illustrates Huck's inclination towards reflection, a trait not commonly found among Southern children (or adults) of his time. A child raised in a more conventional setting might not question the concept of prayer so openly, being aware of the potential repercussions of challenging adult

⁴⁷ HF 2.

authority. Huck, however, having endured harsher punishments from his father and feeling less attached to the widow's world, is more willing to push back. He views prayer as a transaction, questioning who truly benefits from each request. This act of reflection, of "looking back" on what he has been taught and applying logic and personal experience, leads him to dismiss prayer as either nonsense, useless, or both.

Huck Finn does not hold formal education in particularly high regard, either, but he does not scorn it. He is impatient with book learning more than he is outright dismissive of it, preferring instead to focus on the realities of his situation than on theoretical assumptions. For instance, help grows annoyed when Tom Sawyer concocts his convoluted schemes that he learned about books, whether that be forming a band of robbers or orchestrating Jim's escape and the novels closing chapters. Huck finds these schemes impractical and divorced from reality. Among the "low down and ornery" class of outcasts that Huck comes from, education is often seen as a liability and pretense rather than an asset. Pap is particularly disdainful of Huck's education, accusing him of putting on airs and thinking himself as superior to his father and, likewise, his lineage. Pap views Huck's education as a threat and an insult that undermines his standing as patriarch of the Finn family, such as it is, among the uneducated peers who might share pap's attitudes toward social mobility. He berates what he sees as Huck's pretense of being above his station, saying he had "put on considerable many frills since [he had] ben away. I'll take you down a peg before I get done with you."⁴⁸ Demanding to know who had told Huck that he might "meddle in such hifalut'n foolishness," Huck tells his father that it was the widow Douglas who had seen to his education. Enraged at being subverted—and by a woman, no less—Pap assures Huck that he will "learn her to meddle." He then orders Huck to

⁴⁸ HF 24.

abandon on his education, effectively reminding him to remember his place in society and within the Finn family hierarchy.

Huck's disdain for schooling, however, does not belie a foolish mind. At several junctures Huck is forced to rely on his wits first and foremost to advance his journey or even survive his predicament. Significantly, when Huck discovers evidence of pap's return to town, he immediately puts his wits to work to protect himself and his newly acquired wealth. He quickly makes his way to Judge Thatcher's and asks him to take his entire fortune, seeking to transfer all legal ownership before pap can come to seize it for himself. While the judge initially seems puzzled by Huck's request, Huck pleads, "Please take it, and don't ask me nothing—then I won't have to tell no lies."⁴⁹ After studying him a moment, Judge Thatcher takes Huck's meaning, saying, "Oho-o! I think I see. You want to *sell* all your property to me—not give it. That's the correct idea."⁵⁰ He then writes up a contract stating that the transfer of property is in exchange for a "consideration" of \$1. At this point neither Huck nor the reader has much evidence to be sure that Judge Thatcher can be trusted to sell Huck's assets back to him for the same consideration in the future, but one thing Huck *can* be sure of is that it is better to take his chances with Judge Thatcher than with pap.

Neither is Huck wanting for money, as it turns out—not anymore, anyway. Despite his impoverished background, he finds his social standing suddenly elevated due to his newfound wealth. At the outset of the novel, Huck has \$6,000, accruing interest at a dollar per day. As a result of their escapades in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Huck and Tom have come into a small fortune of \$6,000 in gold each as a reward, which Judge Thatcher invests at a rate that earns the boys "a dollar a day apiece all the year round—more than a body could tell what to do

⁴⁹ HF 19.

⁵⁰ HF 20.

with.”⁵¹ But Huck, who now lives with the widow, has no expenses of his own and knows how to live off the land save for a few inexpensive necessities he cannot make himself—corn meal, bacon, bullets, and so on—offers no indication that he sees any real benefit in his new fortune.

Huck places a higher value on tangible items over abstract forms of wealth such as paper money or gold. The loot he collects with Jim and the fishing line he prays for hold more significance and utility to him. Interestingly, this perspective mirrors that of the wealthy class in his society, who also place greater value on tangible “items,” albeit on a larger scale, referring to them as “commodities”—cotton, in particular. During this era, cash money was notoriously unstable, with its value often depreciating to the point where it was barely worth the paper it was printed on, and bank failures were a common occurrence. So, like many poor people, Huck doesn’t trust money. In fact, he views it as a liability. He is keenly aware that his newfound fortune will draw the attention of his abusive, alcoholic father. His prediction becomes reality when his father appears at the Widow’s house to harangue his son in the novel’s early chapters:

“Looky here—mind how you talk to me; I’m
a-standing about all I can stand now—so don’t
gimme no sass. I’ve been in town two days,
and I hain’t heard nothing but about you bein’

⁵¹ If this new wealth greatly improves Huck’s options for a higher quality of life by attracting the attention of adults, also greatly complicates his relationships with the adults in his life. Huck is not just a good kid in the eyes of the widow and the judge (although they have likely convinced themselves that they have correctly judged him to be one), he is valuable in the real terms of their society. His worth, like everyone else’s, is measurable in dollars. Adjusted for inflation, his net worth would be about \$235,000. It is little surprise that the judge is willing to buy Huck’s entire fortune for the “consideration” of \$1. Fundamental shifts in U.S. monetary and economic policy over the centuries make it difficult to account for true inflation over one hundred years or more, but quick estimates suggest \$1 in 1845 to be valued at about \$39 in 2022, with \$6,000 being roughly equivalent to \$235,000 in present-day buying power—more than enough to entice a no-good parent to come looking for it.

rich. I heard about it away down the river, too.
That's why I come. You git me that money to-
morrow—I want it.”⁵²

Even if Huck wanted to give pap the money, he knows that pap could not be trusted with it. Pap wants the money to feed his addiction. Were he to be successful in wresting it away from Huck, he would undoubtedly use it to drink himself to death within the first hundred dollars spent. Huck has his own interests to keep in mind to be sure, but it is also important for Pap's own sake that the money be out of his hands. And while Judge Thatcher might be a reliable custodian of Huck's fortune for the time being, Pap knows that as Huck's biological father, he has a legal claim to Huckleberry Finn—and his money—that will be very persuasive in court. Through Huck's narration, Twain provides an oblique overview of a legal process through which we ascertain that, while the widow Douglas sued pap for custody of Huck, the new judge, who does not know pap and is not familiar with his character, has ruled in pap's favor. We also learn that pap has sued Judge Thatcher for control of Huck's fortune, and while he admits that the judge knows all the legal ways to draw the process out almost *ad infinitum*, he is ultimately confident that the law will come down in his favor.⁵³ Winning custody of Huck means winning custody of everything that belongs to Huck as well.

None of this, of course, would be a problem for Huck had he not come into his \$6,000 fortune. Pap might have lost interest in Huck and then left him alone forever, but he is instead drawn back to kidnap and terrorize his own son for the sake of a big pile of money.

⁵² HF 25.

⁵³ Ibid.

Practical Judgments as Aesthetic Judgments

Huck Finn may not have much in the way of formal education, but he is a thinker all the same. Having grown up as a single child and country outcast with no stable home life, Huck has had to spend a lot of time on his own. In a time before the clamor of media, Huck spent much of his time fishing, hunting, smoking, camping, and lounging in silence, with only the subtle sounds of nature and his own thoughts to fill his mind. His upbringing, characterized by solitude and survival, necessitated a reliance on his own judgment rather than societal norms. This is a child who has spent countless hours in silent contemplation, his mind occupied by the natural world and his own reflections, rather than the clamor of societal expectations.

As Huck is mostly on his own without adult supervision, he is required to make sense of his world on his own quickly and efficiently. He does not adhere to societal rules unless they are immediately applicable to his own life and liberty. He does not behave this way according to any ideological dissent; it is simply a necessity born from his circumstances. Huck's world is one where decisions often carry life-or-death consequences and where they leave no room for ideology. For Huck Finn, the ability to make a reflective, common-sense judgment on the fly is literally a matter of survival. What Huck realizes that those of us who think for a living typically do not is that practical judgements, however much we dress them as logical problems, are always *aesthetic* ones at their most fundamental, precisely in the normative sense that they are problems of *experience*, connected to decisions that are pervasively involved with reflective, life-affirming judgments. When Huck is faced with his most consequential decisions, his actions are guided by a reflection on the desired outcomes. These outcomes, however, are not determined arbitrarily. They are the product of a moral decision-making process, one that requires Huck to engage in deep introspection about what he considers good, asking himself, '*What is the state of affairs I wish to bring about or maintain?*'

This process of deliberation is not merely a logical exercise but a profound engagement with his own aesthetic sensibilities and moral compass.

Coincidentally, as Twain was in the final stages of writing *Huckleberry Finn* in 1883, Charles Sanders Peirce was grappling with similar concepts. Peirce, after years of meticulous study, claimed to have “discovered”⁵⁴ a profound truth: the logical, which is the formal doctrine of how we ought to think if we want to arrive at the truth, is derived from the ethical. The ethical, in turn, is the study of the “ends of actions” and the “right action” we are prepared to deliberately adopt to bring about those desired ends. This ethical dimension is ultimately derived from a fundamental aesthetic judgment, a judgment concerning what is good and right based on what we generally consider to be “good,” or that which we are deliberately prepared to work toward.⁵⁵ This philosophical insight illuminates the nature of Huck’s critical judgments. When Huck makes decisions, he does so with desired results in mind—an aesthetic judgment of what we judge to be good. This is not to suggest that the logical or ideological should be disregarded altogether. As Peirce points out, logic is the mathematical series of rules that allow us to get from point A to point B in a consistent, non-contradictory way.

In the light of Peirce’s philosophical insight, we can see that Huck’s decisions, driven by a survival instinct and a desire for freedom, are not just logical or ethical choices but aesthetic judgments. These judgments, based on what Huck perceives as ‘good’, are made in a world that is often hostile and cruel. Cruelty is at the beating heart of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, manifesting not only in the kind of explosive, aberrant violence of an injudicious inebriate like Pap but also in the more insidious, normalized forms of cruelty that are

⁵⁴ See Peirce, MS L75.345, version 1.

⁵⁵ *CP* 5.130, 1903.

accepted as part and parcel of “civilized” society. The institution of slavery, the casual infliction of pain on animals, and other such instances of normalized cruelty are woven into the very fabric of 19th-century American life. The characters within the novel, ancillary though they may be, reflect a community that has so thoroughly internalized this cruelty that it becomes almost invisible, except to those who are its direct victims. So pervasive is cruelty throughout the culture that it seeps into the realm of children’s play; the make-believe violence that Tom Sawyer requires of his “band of robbers” is a chilling reflection of this reality of boyhood in the antebellum South:

So Tom got out a sheet of paper that he had wrote the oath on, and read it. It swore every boy to stick to the band, and never tell any of the secrets; and if anybody done anything to any boy in the band, whichever boy was ordered to kill that person and his family must do it, and he mustn’t eat and he mustn’t sleep till he had killed them and hacked a cross in their breasts, which was the sign of the band. And nobody that didn’t belong to the band could use that mark, and if he did he must be sued; and if he done it again he must be killed. And if anybody that belonged to the band told the secrets, he must have his throat cut, and then have his carcass burnt up and the ashes scattered all around, and his name blotted off of the list with blood and never mentioned again by the gang, but have a curse put on it and be forgot forever.

Everybody said it was a real beautiful oath, and asked Tom if he got it out of his own head.⁵⁶

If there were any doubt that Twain was preoccupied with human cruelty while writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, recollections from his *Autobiography* make the point clear. In an entry dated January 23, 1906, Twain recalls “among [his] old manuscripts one which [he] perceived about twenty-two years old” that was never printed. His own dating would place the piece’s writing at around 1884, the same year Twain was finishing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Titled “The Character of Man,” the piece begins:

Concerning Man— he is too large a subject to be treated as a whole; so I will merely discuss a detail or two of him at this time. I desire to contemplate him from this point of view—this premiss: that he was not made for any useful purpose, for the reason that he hasn’t served any; that he was most likely not made *intentionally*; and that his working himself up out of the oyster bed to his present position was probably a matter of surprise and regret to the Creator. * * * * For his history, in all climes, all ages and all circumstances, furnishes oceans and continents of proof that of all the creatures that were made he is the most detestable. Of the entire brood he is the only one—the solitary one—that possesses malice. That is the basest of all instincts,

⁵⁶ HF 9-10.

passions, vices—the most hateful. That one thing puts him below the rats, the grubs, the trichinæ. He is the only creature that inflicts pain for sport, knowing it to *be* pain. But if the cat knows she is inflicting pain when she plays with the frightened mouse, then we must make an exception here; we must grant that in one detail man is the moral peer of the cat. *All* creatures kill—there seems to be no exception; but of the whole list, man is the only one that kills for fun; he is the only one that kills in malice, the only one that kills for revenge. Also—in all the list he is the only creature that has a nasty mind.⁵⁷

Twain's fixation on purposiveness in his view of human beings is strikingly apparent in this passage. The great ironic tragedy (or joke, depending on one's disposition) is that the discord between human beings and the rest of nature lies in the idea that they were "not made for any useful purpose," as evidenced by the fact that "[they haven't] served any; that [they were] most likely not made intentionally..." Twain suggests that this is what puts us at odds with the rest of nature, which is intricately organized so that all living things and the organic compounds they depend upon thrive to the benefit of one another. Human beings, unsurpassed in intellect and unchecked in their power, have reached a point where they need not concern themselves with the benefit of any other aspect of nature, having reduced it from a bountiful ecosystem to a merely productive dominion.

⁵⁷ See Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. Harriet Elinor Smith et al., vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 312.

Huck and Twain share this understanding of human cruelty. Twain, having grown up amid the horrors of slavery and racial injustice, paints a vivid picture of the normalized atrocities of his time, and when Huck witnesses these injustices, his response is not one of ideological dissent, but of personal moral judgment. From a 21st century perspective, it might be easy to label Huck as a privileged member of society due to his white skin and to expect him to vocally oppose the injustices he witnesses. However, doing so would have been extremely unpopular among many other white people, some of whom have shown they are willing to commit extreme and grisly violence to reinforce their power.

The following sections explore several high-stakes practical, aesthetic judgments Huck must make over the course of the novel, fundamentally shaping the trajectory of his life and directly calling upon him to decide what is good—and, conversely, what is *not* good. These include rejecting the offer of affluence, permanently cutting ties with his father, placating the king and the duke, and committing to his own damnation before betraying Jim.

Rejecting Propriety

The notion of what is and is not ‘proper’ functions ideologically among the upper-class characters in Twain’s novel to the point of absurdity. While no echelon of Southern society is exempted from his lampooning, the primary and most frequent target of Twain’s barbs is the genteel white culture of the antebellum South, which predicated itself on the importance of propriety, manners, religion, and, in a step above and beyond the everyday racism of the average southerner, blood lineage and property ownership. The grand irony behind all this ostensible gentility, of course, was that it was all made possible by, and continually functioned through, intolerable brutality. The pretense of Southern hospitality is just that—a pretense—and attempting to tear it away could be very dangerous.

In Huck's experience, the absurdity of class obsession reaches its tragic apex in the generations-old Grangerford-Shepherdson feud, which Twain at first plays for laughs, but which culminates in the grisly murder of a twelve-year-old boy. At one point in his travels, Huck is taken in by the well-to-do Grangerford family, which is locked in a generations-old blood feud with another nearby aristocratic clan, the Shepherdsons. Twain describes the Grangerfords as the epitome of Southern gentility, writing:

Col. Grangerford was a gentleman, you see. He was a gentleman all over; and so was his family. He was well born, as the saying is, and that's worth as much in a man as it is in a horse, so the Widow Douglas said, and nobody ever denied that she was of the first aristocracy in our town; and pap he always said it, too, though he warn't no more quality than a mud-cat, himself.⁵⁸

However, it may be difficult for the reader to recognize much gentility in the Grangerfords' actions. The feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons is ostensibly about honor, yet it has persisted so long that no one remembers the original point of contention. Each family believes that the other has tarnished their honor. This, of course, reinforces the cycle of violence. The feud, driven by a misguided sense of propriety and honor, has devastating consequences, especially for the children of these families. Consider Emmeline Grangerford, whose story is a poignant example of the

⁵⁸ HF 142. It is also imperative to observe the prevailing sentiment of *sensus communis*—the notion that an individual's worth is intrinsically tied to their lineage. This perspective was held in common by both the widow and pap, the two most influential adults in Huck's life, despite their markedly divergent backgrounds.

psychological damage inflicted by the constant presence of ongoing violence. Emmeline's life, cut short in her teens, was consumed by a morbid fascination with death, a theme that permeated her poetry and artwork.

Emmeline's artwork, as described by Huck, is a testament to her morbid preoccupations. As Huck recounts her works in Chapter 17: "One was a woman in a slim black dress...leaning pensive on a tombstone on her right elbow, under a weeping willow, and her other hand hanging down her side holding a white handkerchief and a reticule, and underneath the picture it said 'Shall I Never See Thee More Alas.'"⁵⁹ Another drawing depicts a young lady crying into a handkerchief with a dead bird in her other hand, titled "I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas." Emmeline's poetry, too, is filled with themes of death and loss, one of frequent poetic exercises being to write verses about obituaries and accidents she found in the newspaper. As he reflects on Emmeline's story and untimely death, Huck's capacity to feel for others comes to the surface.

Poor Emmeline made poetry about all the dead people when she was alive, and it didn't seem right that there warn't nobody to make some about her now she was gone; so I tried to sweat out a verse or two myself, but I couldn't seem to make it go somehow.⁶⁰

Emmeline's death also serves as an ominous foreshadowing of her brother's impending death at the hands of the Shepherdsons. Buck Grangerford's death, which Huck witnesses, is another tragic consequence of the feud. Despite their different backgrounds, the two

⁵⁹ *HF* 137-138.

⁶⁰ *HF* 141.

boys find common ground and develop an amicable bond, and Buck's death deeply affects Huck. Buck is described as a friendly and welcoming character. When Huck first meets Buck, he is immediately taken in by his warmth and friendliness. But their relationship is short-lived, as Buck is soon shot and killed in a skirmish with the Shepherdsons. Huck is witness to this horrific event, and is deeply traumatized by the experience to the point of post-traumatic stress:

“All of a sudden, bang! bang! bang! goes three or four guns—the men had slipped around through the woods and come in from behind without their horses! The boys jumped for the river—both of them hurt—and as they swum down the current the men run along the bank shooting at them and singing out, ‘Kill them, kill them!’ It made me so sick I most fell out of the tree. I ain’t a-going to tell all that happened—it would make me sick again if I was to do that. I wished I hadn’t ever come ashore that night to see such things. I ain’t ever going to get shut of them—lots of times I dream about them.”⁶¹

The feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons serves as a stark illustration of the lengths to which these families will go to uphold the *sensus communis*, the shared understanding of propriety and honor, at all costs. As aristocrats, their status and wealth are intrinsically tied to the preservation of these societal norms and power structures. The concept of “sacred honor” becomes a tool to justify their actions and maintain their position of power. However, this pursuit of

⁶¹ HF 153.

honor and status, as embodied in the feud, reveals a tragic irony. The very structures and norms they strive to uphold lead to their own constant self-obliteration at each other's hands—a conceit that Twain easily could have made into a joke if he had decided to kill off the adults who perpetuated the violence. But that Twain chooses to have the feud result in the deaths of their children reveals the truth: there is nothing funny in an endless cycle of killing. Instead, their wealth, power, and status are only temporarily preserved at the cost of their children's lives—the very progeny that would have extended the bloodlines they hold so very dear.

The novel's most horrifying episode of *sensus communis* asserting its dominance is in the brief, nihilistic vignette that portrays the grim resolution to an Arkansaw class skirmish. Boggs, a town drunk, is shot and killed in broad daylight by Colonel Sherburn, who then calmly returns to his home. The town's residents, incensed that someone would shoot one of their local own and walk away, trail him back to his residence with the intention of lynching him, only to find themselves, a mob of several dozen, utterly intimidated in the middle of the day by a single ill-tempered patrician sneering from his balcony:

“The idea of you lynching anybody! It's amusing. The idea of you thinking you had pluck enough to lynch a man! Because you're brave enough to tar and feather poor friendless cast-out women that come along here, did that make you think you had grit enough to lay your hands on a man? Why, a man's safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind—as long as it's daytime and you're not behind him.”⁶²

⁶² HF 190.

Sherburn's venomous invective, spewed from the comfort of his balcony, would have served as a chilling reality check to Twain's readers. The isolated incident, which has virtually no narrative impact on the rest of the novel, nevertheless communicates the underlying understanding—the *sensus communis*—that would have been shared by anyone who ever lived in the American South, before or after the war: you cannot take a meaningful stand against the powers that be in this world without being done away with:

“Do I know you? I know you clear through. I was born and raised in the South, and I’ve lived in the North; so I know the average all around. The average man’s a coward. In the North he lets anybody walk over him that wants to, and goes home and prays for a humble spirit to bear it. In the South one man all by himself, has stopped a stage full of men in the daytime, and robbed the lot. Your newspapers call you a brave people so much that you think you *are* braver than any other people—whereas you’re just *as* brave, and no braver. Why don’t your juries hang murderers? Because they’re afraid the man’s friends will shoot them in the back, in the dark—and it’s just what they *would* do.

“So they always acquit; and then a *man* goes in the night, with a hundred masked cowards at his back and lynches the rascal. Your mistake is, that you didn’t bring a man with you; that’s one mistake, and the other is that you didn’t come in the dark and fetch your masks. You brought *part* of a man—Buck

Harkness, there—and if you hadn't had him to start you, you'd a taken it out in blowing.

“You didn't want to come. The average man don't like trouble and danger. *You* don't like trouble and danger. But if only *half* a man—like Buck Harkness, there—shouts ‘Lynch him! lynch him!’ you're afraid to back down—afraid you'll be found out to be what you are—*cowards*—and so you raise a yell, and hang yourselves on to that half-a-man's coat-tail, and come raging up here, swearing what big things you're going to do. The pitifulest thing out is a mob; that's what an army is—a mob; they don't fight with courage that's born in them, but with courage that's borrowed from their mass, and from their officers. But a mob without any *man* at the head of it is *beneath* pitifulness. Now the thing for *you* to do is to droop your tails and go home and crawl in a hole. If any real lynching's going to be done it will be done in the dark, Southern fashion; and when they come they'll bring their masks, and fetch a *man* along. Now *leave*—and take your half-a-man with you.”⁶³

In this brief episode, which is profoundly non-cathartic, vast swaths of angry, violent discontents are easily cowed back into their place by a wealthy untouchable who has already demonstrated his willingness to shoot anyone among them in broad daylight. He knows—correctly—

⁶³ HF 190-191.

that he will get away with it. He reminds the mob that holding people accountable means risking the ire of their friends, among whom there are almost certainly one or two willing to commit violence. He ominously demonstrates his belief that the ‘right’ way to kill someone important—if there could be such a thing—is to do it surreptitiously, ‘in the dark,’ with deniability intact. Sherburn’s repeated excoriation of the mob’s failure to ‘bring a man’ along, while fraught with the baggage of 19th-century chauvinism (which has been critiqued at length elsewhere), points to a more structural critique of democratic movements and structures. Sherburn, whose military honorific invokes rank and status, behaves from the moment he appears to the last word he utters exactly like a person who considers himself untouchable by those around him—because he is.

Sherburn’s repeated criticism of the mob’s failure to “bring a man” along, while fraught with all the baggage of 19th century chauvinism that has been critiqued at length elsewhere, points to a more structural critique of democratic movements and structures. By “bring a man,” Sherburn is invoking a person (in the 19th century South, basically always a biological man) who is of such a position that he can direct the mob, make it effective. To Sherburn, a “man” means an operator, a person of means and influence. His monologue is a chilling reminder of the power dynamics at play in the society of the time. He stands on his balcony, looking down at the mob, and delivers a scathing critique of their lack of courage and their dependence on the safety of numbers. He mocks their pretense of bravery, their reliance on the anonymity of the mob, reminding them if any single one of them needed to draw together all their social power to protect themselves or advance their interests, they could not do it.

Sherburn’s speech is a sobering return to reality for a novel that often veers into the realm of the absurd. It demonstrates to the reader what Huck already knows—sometimes the most commonsensical thing to do is let an absurdity pass in silence. The crowd disperses, utterly defeated, and Huck, for his part, keeps his mouth shut and stays out of

things as much as he can. That said, he is certainly bewildered by his world. And if society rejects him as a “low-down and ornery” sort, Huck rejects it right back—first on the grounds of its absurdities and later on the grounds of its cruelties and lack of pity. Huck’s moral distastes, in fact, align precisely with the very things that St. Petersburg’s polite society holds in the highest esteem: religion, education, and, above all, money. These all seem so far removed from our humanness, our connection to nature, which is very important to Huck, who essentially lives off the land. They are all so artificial, dangerous, cruel, and ultimately pointless. The *sensus communis*, the shared understanding of society, is revealed to be a hollow facade—a dangerous game of pretense and power that leaves no room for genuine human connection or empathy. In fact, these values are often in direct opposition to them.

Dealing with Pap

One of Huck’s most important judgments in all the novel is the realization that his father, whom Twain only refers to as “pap,” is the greatest threat in his life, further discerning that despite their familial connection, pap is irredeemable and must be excised from his life completely. This is an absolute rejection of one’s patriarchal blood lineage, but one that is necessary for Huck to move forward in his life. From the outset, pap is portrayed as an existential threat to Huck, his history of violence and unpredictable nature serving as relentless sources of tension and fear. Though we learn in the novel’s opening pages that pap has not been seen around town for some time, Huck is on high alert for his return all the same, constantly vigilant to spot signs of pap’s presence. His paranoia, of course, is well-founded, for pap does indeed come looking for Huck’s newfound fortune.

Pap’s presence—both when physically present and when hovering unseen in the background—is as inescapable as the fact that Huck owes half his genetic makeup to this hateful, violent imbecile. Pap embodies

the archetype of the angry, illiterate, “dirty” South, characterized almost entirely by his irascibility, bigotry, sense of victimhood, and propensity to violence. As a representative of the disenfranchised white working class, he relies on institutionalized racism—first slavery, and later Jim Crow—to maintain some semblance of superiority. In pap, we see the manifestation of internalized victimization. His world is one of unrelenting hatred and blame directed outward at society, with the government, affluent individuals, and the Black population serving as his primary targets. His language, particularly his use of racial slurs, is loaded with palpable hatred, and his venomous invective against a Black professor encapsulates the resentment felt by the socially and economically disadvantaged white population.

“Oh, yes, this is a wonderful govment, wonderful. Why, looky here. There was a free n—r there from Ohio—a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat; and there ain’t a man in that town that’s got as fine clothes as what he had; and he had a gold watch and chain, and a silver-headed cane—the awfulest old gray-headed nabob in the State. And what do you think? They said he was a p’fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain’t the wust. They said he could vote when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was ‘lection day, and I was just about to go and vote myself if I warn’t too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a State in this country where they’d let that n—r vote, I drawed out. I says I’ll never vote agin.

Them's the very words I said; they all heard me; and the country may rot for all me—I'll never vote agin as long as I live. And to see the cool way of that n—r—why, he wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out o' the way. I says to the people, why ain't this n—r put up at auction and sold?—that's what I want to know. And what do you reckon they said? Why, they said he couldn't be sold till he'd been in the State six months, and he hadn't been there that long yet. There, now—that's a specimen. They call that a govment that can't sell a free n—r till he's been in the State six months. Here's a govment that calls itself a govment, and lets on to be a govment, and thinks it is a govment, and yet's got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take a hold of a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free n—r, and—”

Pap was agoing on so he never noticed where his old limber legs was taking him to, so he went head over heels over the tub of salt pork and barked both shins, and the rest of his speech was all the hottest kind of language—mostly hove at the n—r and the govment, though he give the tub some, too...⁶⁴

The only thing that pap fails to blame for his miserable lot in life is, ironically, the one thing he has some degree of agency over—his alcoholism. The new judge in town, who will decide the fate of Huck's

⁶⁴ HF 34.

fortune and whose favor Pap tries to court, identifies him as a wayward sinner whose addiction, through the lens of his Christian worldview, is the manifestation of having fallen under the spell of one of Satan's many temptations. Pap likewise identifies the judge as a garden-variety Southern Christian and preys upon his eagerness to see himself as a generous, forgiving soul after the heart of the Lord. Pap's tearful confession elicits the pity of the judge and his wife, and soon they all sob together as pap pledges to be "a man that's started a new life."⁶⁵ But of course, as soon as pap is tucked into his stately guestroom for the night, he develops a thirst and slips out the window and into town, where he trades his new clothes—the symbol of the judge's beneficence reduced to a barter item in Pap's hands—for a jug of whiskey before returning to have a "good old time" on the judge's premises. After finding the drunkard the next day, having destroyed the guestroom, rolled off the roof, and broken his arm in two places, the judge concludes that "a body could reform the old man with a shotgun, maybe, but he didn't know no other way."⁶⁶

Huck himself never makes any mention of attempting to "reform the old man" and does not belie any indication that he believes it could be done; his lack of comment on the matter, besides, does not indicate that he even has any desire to. Huck is ultimately faced with the judgment (in this case, a decision)⁶⁷ of what to do when he makes the grim realization that without a dramatic change in circumstances, Pap's deteriorating alcoholism will lead to continued violence against the boy, even up to the point of killing him. Pap's addiction reaches that very inflection point in Chapter 6, when, still holding Huck hostage in his remote woodland cabin, Pap reaches a state of alcoholic hallucinosis, an extremely dangerous condition similar delirium

⁶⁵ HF 26.

⁶⁶ HF 28.

⁶⁷ Note the distinction between judgment as object-concept or scenario judgment (i.e. "this is x," or "x is happening here") vs. judgment as decision (i.e. "I judge that the right thing to do is x").

tremens but brought on much more suddenly by cessation of heavy drinking.⁶⁸ Alcoholic hallucinosis is primarily characterized by intense auditory hallucinations that have been found to resemble the symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia; in pap's case, he comes to believe that Huck is "the Angel of Death," having come to take him. Taking a knife, he tries to kill Huck, but Huck manages to evade his attacks until Pap passes out.

From this point forward Huck makes the decision to abandon his father and, by extension, his lineage. Unlike the Grangerfords, a genteel Southern family who pride themselves on their ancestry, Huck has no attachment to his past or family heritage. His only known relatives are his abusive father and his late mother, rendering his lineage far from prestigious. In sharp contrast to societal expectations of a peer like Tom Sawyer, Huck adopts a pragmatic approach, prioritizing his safety and well-being over familial obligations. Thus, Huck abandons his father forever, giving no indication of remorse or regret. To well-bred Southern gentility like the Grangerfords, abandoning one's lineage would be unthinkable. But Huck, a mongrel of the South who likely does not know much of his family history at all, probably reckons he is better off not getting too hung up on it.

"Making Allowances"

The novel takes a pivotal turn at the beginning of Chapter 19, when Twain introduces a pair of dastardly ne'er-do-wells who will soon emerge as the closest thing to traditional, embodied antagonists as the novel has. As Huck and Jim are slipping back onto the raft in the aftermath of the Shepardson-Grangerford massacre, Huck spies "a couple of men tearing up the path as tight as they could foot it."⁶⁹ Huck,

⁶⁸ P.S. Bhat et al., "Alcoholic Hallucinosis," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 21, no. 2 (July 2012): 155-57, doi:10.4103/0972-6748.119646.

⁶⁹ *HF* 158.

who immediately assumes the worst of intentions, tries to set off in the raft before the two can get near; but his inclination toward compassion over hard-heartedness gets the better of him as they “sung out and begged [Huck] to save their lives—said they hadn’t been doing nothing, and was being chased for it—said there was men and dogs a-coming.”⁷⁰ This unceremonious entrance does not befit the titles (and the tragic backstories) that these two soon bestow upon themselves—the “rightful Duke of Bridgewater... forlorn, torn from [his] high estate, despised by the cold world, ragged, worn, heart-broken, and degraded to the companionship of felons on a raft,”⁷¹ and “the pore disappeared Dauphin, Looy the Seventeen, son of Looy the Sixteen and Marry Antonette... in blue jeans and misery, the wanderin’, exiled, trampled-on, and sufferin’ rightful King of France.”⁷² All parties feign astonishment at these dramatic revelations, but Huck quickly realizes that these two are not who they claim to be, but he decides just as quickly to play along anyway:

It didn’t take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn’t no kings nor dukes at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds. But I never said nothing, never let on; kept it to myself; it’s the best way; then you don’t have no quarrels, and don’t get into no trouble. If they wanted us to call them kings and dukes, I hadn’t no objections, ‘long as it would keep peace in the family; and it warn’t no use to tell Jim, so I didn’t tell him. If I never learnt nothing else out of pap, I learnt that the best

⁷⁰ *HF* 159.

⁷¹ *HF* 162.

⁷² *HF* 163.

way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way.⁷³

Thus, Huck and Jim go through the motions of making “allowances” for the king and the duke, a process which largely involves serving their meals, making their stay on the raft comfortable, and acting as accomplices to their illicit schemes. Huck and Jim placate the scoundrels to avoid conflict, recognizing their selfish and dangerous nature. Their difference is merely an act of self-preservation against violent, unscrupulous men. In private discussion, however, and Jim unpack the two swindlers and their motivations when discussing how best to make sense of them:

“Don’t it s’prise you de way dem kings carries on, Huck?”

“No,” I says, “it don’t.”

“Why don’t it, Huck?”

“Well, it don’t, because it’s in the breed. I reckon they’re all alike.”

“But, Huck, dese kings o’ ourn is reglar rapscallions; dat’s jist what dey is; dey’s reglar rapscallions.”

“Well, that’s what I’m a-saying; all kings is mostly rapscallions, as fur as I can make out.”

“Is dat so?”

“You read about them once—you’ll see... All I say is, kings is kings, and you got to make allowances. Take them all around, they’re a

⁷³ HF 165.

mighty ornery lot. It's the way they're raised."⁷⁴

As he goes on to unpack various examples of this “mighty ornery lot,” as he calls them, Huck explains that what these two “deposed aristocrats” on the Mississippi and the mightiest kings in European history have in common is their proclivity to simply claim authority that does not necessarily belong to them by rights in the first place. Their sense of entitlement, as well as the violent means to which they are willing to resort in order to enforce it, recalls Paine’s jab at William the Conqueror and, by extension, the whole English monarchy, in *Common Sense*: “A French bastard landing with an armed banditti, and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original.—It certainly hath no divinity in it.”⁷⁵

Huck and Jim placate the two not out of respect, but as an act of simple self-preservation, each aware that they could easily be met with violence for resisting or, in Jim’s case, returned to captivity. Of course, Twain demonstrates the ultimate irony involved in making the decisions to “make allowances” for self-proclaimed kings when, despite their best efforts to appease them, the king and duke turn Jim in for the reward money anyway, the modest sum of “forty dirty dollars.”⁷⁶ In this sly commentary, which Twain could easily have imagined applying to an underclass of complicit, poor white southerners who idolized their aristocratic overlords’ romanticized way of life, Twain demonstrates the ultimate danger of this style of self-preservation—that tyrants treat their subjects as a means to their own ends. This, Twain suggests is the grim reality that southerners needed to understand of their societal betters—that to “make allowances” for

⁷⁴ HF 199.

⁷⁵ CS 14.

⁷⁶ HF 268.

a tyrant is to expose oneself to almost certain betrayal. What seems at first to be a practical decision geared toward survival demonstrates itself to be a grave error in judgment as Huck and Jim fail to rid themselves of the two in time to avoid the ill consequences of their acquaintance.

Trusting Tom Sawyer

Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer come from vastly different social backgrounds. Tom, a member of a respectable middle-class family, enjoys a level of social security and privilege that Huck, the son of the town drunkard, can only dream of. This disparity in their social statuses creates an underlying tension in their relationship, as Huck often finds himself deferring to Tom's judgment, not necessarily because he agrees with him, but because he recognizes the social capital that Tom possesses. They find a common purpose, however, in their willingness, even need, to oppose the *sensus communis*: Huck, being an outsider, was not brought up within the trappings of Southern gentility and finds much of it opposed to his needs and wants, and Tom seeks to indulge in his need to rebel and explore the boundaries of what he can get away with. Thus, it was inevitable that they would become fast friends: "Tom was like the rest of the respectable boys, in that he envied Huckleberry his gaudy outcast condition, and was under strict orders not to play with him. So he played with him every time he got a chance."⁷⁷

Unpacking Huck's friendship with Tom requires simultaneously holding two competing interpretations of its dynamics in one's mind. On the one hand—and in the more immediate sense—Twain paints⁷⁸ Tom and Huck's friendship as a genuine one that is rooted in shared interests and experiences. On the cusp of adolescence, Huck and Tom

⁷⁷ Twain, *Tom Sawyer*, 40.

⁷⁸ Or "whitewashes," if the reader will pardon the pun.

are only just arriving at a point in life in which the petty concerns of adulthood are theirs to worry about; at this age, they are more concerned with adventure and rebelliousness than money, property, and other units of status.

Tom, a member of a respectable middle-class family, is drawn to Huck's company, in part, due to his own rebellious nature. However, this rebellion is inextricably linked to his social position in relation to Huck. In a sense Tom is slumming when hangs around with Huck; he is willing to engage in distasteful behavior by Aunt Sally's standards, but as a child in a well-to-do family, Tom always a reliable social support net to fall back on. Tom's rebellious acts are a form of exploration, a testing of boundaries that his privileged status allows him to undertake without serious consequences. For Huck, though, an outsider and the son of the town drunkard, these acts of rebellion are not just games or adventures but a necessary means of survival. As Huck's connection to society, Tom has social capital that Huck never could never have imagined as a backwoods nobody, "low-down and ornery" as he is. He may have gained a foothold for his own good standing in the community, but ultimately it is Tom and Tom's family vouching for his character that gives Huck refuge within the community of St. Petersburg.

However, we know from early in the novel that Huck does not take Tom Sawyer seriously as an individual, having sized him up as a liar and a bit of a con man, one perhaps too caught up in his own elaborate artifices. While Tom is a fairly constant companion, there are moments when Huck begins to grow weary of Tom's fanciful tales and elaborate games, which he sees as pointless and unproductive. Huck resigns from their game of "robbers" because they never actually rob anyone or do anything of substance. He finds no value in their pretend adventures, stating, "But I couldn't see no profit in it." This point is reinforced when Tom concocts a game about a treasure-laden caravan of Arabs, Spaniards, and elephants: Huck is skeptical but decides to tag along anyway, giving Tom Sawyer the benefit of the doubt yet again, though

he knows to expect no different. When it turns out to be nothing more than a Sunday-school picnic, Huck's skepticism is confirmed, seeing that "it warn't anything but a Sunday-school picnic, and only a primer-class at that." When Huck confronts Tom about the disappointing find, saying, "I didn't see no di'monds," Tom Sawyer resorts to one of the con man's favorite tactics—he gaslights.

He said there was loads of them there, anyway; and he said there was A-rabs there, too, and elephants and things. I said, why couldn't we see them, then? He said if I warn't so ignorant, but had read a book called Don Quixote, I would know without asking. He said it was all done by enchantment. He said there was hundreds of soldiers there, and elephants and treasure, and so on, but we had enemies which he called magicians; and they had turned the whole thing into an infant Sunday-school, just out of spite. I said, all right; then the thing for us to do was to go for the magicians. Tom Sawyer said I was a numskull.⁷⁹

By the end of the novel, however, after Huck and Jim have arrived at the Phelps' family farm—as a guest and a prisoner, respectively—Huck's acquaintance with Tom Sawyer literally saves them, as the Phelpses turn out to be Tom's not-so-distant kin in a twist that is notably far-fetched, even for Twain. The Phelpses, who are Tom's distant relatives, unknowingly provide a gateway for Huck and Jim

⁷⁹ HF 15-16.

back into society. The irony is not lost on Huck, who has spent most of the novel rejecting societal norms and expectations. However, he recognizes that Tom's social standing and influence could in this case be their saving grace.

Twain's portrayal of Jim's reaction to Tom's escape plan is particularly noteworthy. While he depicts Jim as being genuinely impressed by Tom's elaborate scheme, it's crucial to consider that Jim also understands that being in Tom's good graces increases his chances of survival. As such, Jim knows better than to openly express any disdain or skepticism he might feel towards a white person's position, even if he is just a boy. What might initially be interpreted as a descent into minstrelsy and submissive capitulation is not merely the deployment of a racist trope. Instead, Twain is illustrating a survival mechanism, a strategy employed by Jim to navigate the treacherous waters of the antebellum South. Jim's apparent admiration for Tom's plan, then, can be seen as a calculated move, a performance designed to placate those in power as long as is necessary to increase his chances of survival and, eventually, freedom.

The climax of their grand escape plan unfolds as a grand farce. When the trio finally puts their plan into action, it immediately descends into chaos. Tom ends up shot in the leg, and Jim is recaptured, ironically because of his decision to turn back and help the wounded Tom. This incident provides a stark illustration of Jim's inherent worth and humanity, which is ironically acknowledged by the doctor who tends to Tom's wounds, saying "a n—r like that is worth a thousand dollars—and kind treatment, too."⁸⁰ This statement, while seemingly a compliment, underscores the dehumanizing reality of Jim's existence as a slave, where his worth is quantified in monetary terms, and his deservingness of kindness is seen as exceptional rather than a basic human right.

⁸⁰ HF 353.

Twain, however, spares us the heart-wrenching spectacle of Jim's tragic re-enslavement or sale down the river. Instead, he delivers a surprising revelation: Jim had been a free man for months, ever since Miss Watson's death. This twist in the tale is as shocking as it is infuriating. Tom, it turns out, had been aware of Jim's freedom all along. Yet, he chose to keep this crucial piece of information to himself, orchestrating an elaborate and dangerous escape plan for his own amusement. To Tom, the entire ordeal was nothing more than a game, a grand adventure to be enjoyed, savored, and recollected later. This revelation underscores the stark contrast between Tom's privileged position and Jim's precarious existence. For Tom, the stakes were never real; he was merely playing a role in his own romanticized narrative. For Jim, however, the stakes were his life and freedom. The disparity between their experiences serves as a chilling reminder of the power dynamics at play, and the cruel indifference of those who, like Tom, can afford to treat life-altering circumstances as mere child's play.

Huck's decision to go along with Tom's plan, despite its absurdity, is not born out of trust in Tom's *judgment* but rather out of a recognition of the power dynamics at play. Huck understands that Tom, with his social standing and charm, can likely get away with just about anything. More importantly, Huck further bets that Tom's word will protect him, so he understands that it is in his better interest not to alienate him. Jim, too, understands this dynamic and chooses to endure further indignity for the chance at freedom. Huck, too, makes a similar concession. He sets aside his common sense, his instinct for practical and straightforward solutions, in favor of the *sensus communis*. This is not a rejection of his own judgment but another strategic decision to ingratiate himself with Tom Sawyer and ensure that he will vouch for them if necessary.

Saving Jim

*“Your damnation don’t slumber; it will come swiftly
and, in all probability, very suddenly upon many of you.
You have reason to wonder that you are not already in
hell.”*

—EDWARDS⁸¹

The most substantial and pivotal judgment Huck makes is his decision to commit himself to aiding in Jim’s escape. Being the ethical crux of the novel, this decision forces Huck to confront, head-on, what it means for a white person to act as a moral agent in the 1850s American South. Being of the status that he is—not to mention a child—Huck’s ability to influence the workings of society is virtually nil; he has some money at his disposal, but he is not wealthy by any meaningful standard.⁸² Still, there are several points at which Huck’s decisions directly affect Jim’s wellbeing, with none being more important than his decision to risk eternal damnation to advance Jim’s escape.

In Chapter 31, Huck makes the decision, once and for all and after agonizing reflection, that he would rather go to hell than turn Jim in. Though he has furthered Jim’s running away consistently up to this point, and at times has fretted over the morality of it, he has been able to brush aside the ultimate moral question until this point in the novel. Until now, assisting Jim has largely coincided with furthering Huck’s

⁸¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: A Sermon Preached at Enfield, July 8th, 1741*. *Selected Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, edited by Harry Norman Gardiner, Macmillan, 1904, 95.

⁸² Having access to \$6,000 cash in 1850 would yield roughly the equivalent of \$241,000 in purchasing power in 2024—enough to buy a home in the country and get started on some sensible investments, but far from world-moving money. See “\$6,000 in 1850 → 2024 | Inflation Calculator.” *Official Inflation Data*, Alioth Finance, August 10, 2024. <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1850?amount=6000>.

own journey; here, however, he has arrived at a decision which, if he *does* decide to act in Jim's favor, he is almost certainly acting against his own well-being. Assessing Huck's decisions regarding Jim's well-being is brought into sharp focus at this point in the novel because Twain finally forces Huck to consider the fullness of the stakes of his decision.

Understanding the fact that this is a moral quandary at all for Huck is central to understanding the novel and the culture it so insistently excoriates. From a present-day perspective—one that, despite still being mired in racial injustice, considers chattel slavery unequivocally abhorrent—no moral judgment could seem more natural than to believe that helping a man to freedom is good and right. But nothing could be further from the 19th-century white Southern perspective through which Huck is working. As we have been reminded several times to this point, aiding the escape of a runaway slave is defined as theft in Huck's culture. Though still a child, Huck's world has shown itself time and again to be a pitiless and unforgiving one—whoever the arbiter may be, someone will see to it that Huck is punished for his crimes (his harrowing recollections of what had become of Buck Grangerford for the sin of having the wrong name may well trouble him as well). And soon, Huck considers not just the earthly implications of what he's done, but the eternal ones as well.

And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's n—r that hadn't ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there's One that's always on the lookout, and ain't a-going to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped

in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, 'there was the Sunday-school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you there that people that acts as I'd been acting about that n—r goes to everlasting fire.'⁸³

Southern Protestantism, the foundational *sensus communis* throughout the South in Huck's time and our own, is deeply concerned with both the immortality of the soul and the conditions under which it will spend eternity. The God of the American South is the wrathful God of Edwards' *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, who is quick to anger and generous in His dispensation of punishment. Southern preachers borrowed liberally from Edwards' theology (minus his abolitionism), especially Baptists and Presbyterians. Among the many marks he left on Southern Protestantism is its preoccupation with hell, and how easy it can be to end up there.

Hell, it must be remembered, was not (and still is not) an abstract, metaphorical concept in the minds of most white southern Christians in the mid-19th century. These people believe that hell is very real—it is not a lamentable, metaphysical separation from God; it is a tangible, physical place where sinners go to suffer infinitely at the hands of demons. Consisting mostly of Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians (plus some Lutherans and Episcopalians), most Southern Protestants traced their conceptions of hell to the old Puritans and their sermons on the subject. "The misery of the wicked in hell will be absolutely eternal" Edwards wrote in 1739: "That eternal death, or punishment,

⁸³ HF 269.

which God threatens to the wicked, is not annihilation, but an abiding sensible punishment or misery.”⁸⁴

For the faithful in Huck’s community, hell is not merely a spiritual or metaphysical state of existence, but a realm of physical torment. Edwards, in his writings, offers a vivid, albeit nonspecific, portrayal of the experience of hell. His words conjure an image of a place of ceaseless suffering, a place as real and tangible as the physical world we inhabit. Edwards writes, in terms that are nonspecific yet nonetheless palpable, about the experience of hell:

It is the wrath of the infinite God. If it were only the wrath of man, though it were of the most potent prince, it would be comparatively little to be regarded. The wrath of kings is very much dreaded, especially of absolute monarchs, that have the possessions and lives of their subjects wholly in their power, to be disposed of at their mere will... The subject that very much enrages an arbitrary prince is liable to suffer the most extreme torments that human art can invent, or human power can inflict. But the greatest earthly potentates, in their greatest majesty and strength, and when clothed in their greatest terrors, are but feeble, despicable worms of the dust, in comparison of the great and almighty Creator and King of heaven and earth...⁸⁵

⁸⁴ See Edwards, *The Eternity of Hell’s Torments* [*A Sermon on Matt. Xxv. 46.*], edited by Charles Edward De Coetlogon, 1788, p. 9.

⁸⁵ Edwards, *Sinners*, 89.

In other words, conceiving of hell for a white fundamentalist Christian is to consider the worst kinds of physical torture imaginable. It would involve imagining being *conscious* of the pain from this torture, as the body will never succumb to numbness or lose consciousness from the pain. It can only be conceived as pain that is beyond endurance but must be endured nonetheless. Forever.

It is everlasting wrath. It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity there will be no end to this exquisite, horrible misery. When you look forward, shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all; you will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty, merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite. Oh, who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it give but a very feeble, faint representation of it; it is inexpressible and inconceivable: for ‘who knows the power of God’s anger? How dreadful is the state of

those that are daily and hourly in danger of this great wrath and infinite misery!⁸⁶

That is what white Christian Southerners believe hell is. To Christian Southerners of Huck's time, hell was not an abstraction or metaphor. It was a vivid, tangible reality, a place of ceaseless physical torment. This belief plays a critical role in shaping their moral and ethical decision-making in Huck's community—namely, that challenging the *sensus communis* in virtually any way might be considered an act of such onerous transgression that it offends God to the point of exercising His ultimate punitive authority. Every week, congregations were sternly reminded from the pulpits of the presumed consequences of challenging the established order, which their pastors claimed was “ordained by God.” In practice, what Southern aristocrats sought to uphold was not the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus, but rather a power structure that ensured their continued prosperity and dominance. They papered over this grotesque reality with a theology that not only justified their actions but also placed them at the top of a hierarchy that directed its lowest members to treat their oppressors “with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ” (Ephesians 6:5). The God they worshiped not only condoned but actively encouraged their dominion over the earth, capital, labor, animals, natural resources, and everything else they could bring under their dominion. Like all strongmen, they maintained their exploitative order through the constant threat—and frequent demonstration—of violence. They extorted the people around them by forceful means, using their theology as a tool to legitimize their actions and maintain their grip on power.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 93-94.

Undoubtedly many of these grim ruminations would have cascaded through Huck's mind in a flash. "It made me shiver," Huck writes, reflecting on the possibility of such a fate, before engaging in the only activity he would have been consciously aware of as a tool for wrestling through such problems: he prays. Recall that Huck is thoroughly grounded in the idea that it is categorically sinful to advance a runaway slave's escape. Doing so is immediately intuitable as theft in Huck's *sensus communis*, and theft is unambiguously forbidden by God.⁸⁷ Huck prays for deliverance from his "sinful" temptations—which is to say, the "temptation" to assist Jim—as the widow has instructed him, but runs into unavoidable trouble by recognizing that he simply *cannot do that*:

I about made up my mind to pray, and see if I couldn't try to quit being the kind of a boy I was and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come. Why wouldn't they? It warn't no use to try and hide it from Him. Nor from *me*, neither. I knowed very well why they wouldn't come. It was because my heart warn't right; it was because I warn't square; it was because I was playing double. I was letting *on* to give up sin, but away inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth *say* I would do the right thing and the clean thing, and go and write to that n—r's owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie, and He knowed it. You can't pray a lie—I found that out.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Exodus 20:15.

⁸⁸ HF 269.

Now Huck finds himself in a remarkable predicament concerning his moral decision-making process. Convinced as he is that the act of aiding a runaway is inherently wrong, he likewise is convinced that his *actual* moral feeling—i.e., that it is *wrong* that Jim should suffer by going back into slavery—is itself morally abhorrent, according to the standards of his community. Huck’s previous internalization of his own “orneriness,” exacerbated by his outcast state and wretched family history, paves the way for him to see himself as the inherent sinner that he has been taught he is. Doing the “right thing,” as his community standards would have it, would mean turning Jim in, despite the knowledge that Miss Watson might be so enraged by Jim’s “ungratefulness” as to sell him down the river. But his “gut” feeling (which is to say, his *aesthetic* consideration) is that it would not be good or right to do this because it would cause suffering to Jim, and Huck is the only person in the novel to recognize that Jim’s aesthetic experiences—his *feelings*—are important.

Huck gives up on his prayer, but not on thinking through what to do next. He writes out the confessional note intended for Miss Watson, but considers Jim again, this time in the context of their time spent together, and not through the lens of the *sensus communis*. Huck says that he:

...went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn’t

seem to strike no places to harden me against
him...⁸⁹

If Huck had not taken the time to reflect on this moral judgment, he easily might have dismissed the matter altogether. Anyone in Huck's position would have been taught from childhood that Jim is property first and last, and we see in Huck's wrestling with the subject that he has a lot of trouble thinking around that concept as well, feeling guilt as he does for "stealing a poor old woman's n—r that hadn't ever done [him] no harm."⁹⁰ Undoubtedly, any of Huck's white contemporaries would not think twice about turning in a runaway if given the opportunity; not only would it be criminal not to do so, but there would often be a monetary reward offered, as well. Fortunately, since Huck does not place much stock in money (and since he not in want of it), the latter consideration never crosses his mind. Instead, Huck finds himself unable to "harden"⁹¹ himself against Jim, who by this point has openly confessed that he considers Huck to be his only friend in the world:

"Pooty soon I'll be a-shout'n' for joy, en I'll
say, it's all on accounts o' Huck; I's a free

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ The syntax of this sentence is interesting, containing unclear relationship between the direct object of who exactly "hadn't ever done [him] no harm." Contextually, Huck clearly means Miss Watson, this being the point at which he wrestles with her victim hood. However, Huck's poor grammar creates a slick double-meaning here: syntactically, he is saying it is the "old woman's n—r" who had never wronged him.

⁹¹ A turn of phrase clearly invoking Huck's protestant upbringing, the notion of a "hardened heart" appears numerous times throughout the Old and New Testaments, often in reference to figures in power refusing to have (which is to say, *feel*) pity for those suffering. See Exodus 4:21, 7:3-4, 14:8; Deuteronomy 2:30; Isaiah 6:10, 42:25; Matthew 3:15 (as well as Acts 28:17 — same verse appears in both books), Romans 2:5; and Revelation 16:9. Twain's ironic invocation of just those passages of scripture that emphasize the sinfulness of refusing to accept as valid the pain of others is among his more subtle indicators of the ever-present moral hypocrisy of the adults in Huck's society, not to mention Twain's own command of scripture.

man, en I couldn't ever ben free ef it hadn' ben
for Huck; Huck done it. Jim won't ever forgit
you, Huck; you's de bes' fren' Jim's ever had;
en you's de only fren' ole Jim's got now."⁹²

Initially, Huck is inclined to believe that the morally correct course of action would be to turn Jim in—not to mention the fact that he is terrified by the prospect of eternal damnation. Motivated by fears associated with violating these societal norms, Huck writes a letter to Miss Watson revealing Jim's location. For a moment, Huck feels a sense of pride, a belief that he has done the "right" thing. But the feeling is brief; having "resolved" his moral quandary, Huck forgets to return to his prayer and instead lets his mind wander, first toward the satisfaction of "thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell" but soon meandering into more important matters:

And [I] went on thinking. And got to thinking
over our trip down the river; and I see Jim
before me all the time: in the day and in the
night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes
storms, and we a-floating along, talking and
singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't
seem to strike no places to harden me against
him, but only the other kind. I'd see him
standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of
calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see
him how glad he was when I come back out of
the fog; and when I come to him again in the
swamp, up there where the feud was; and

⁹² HF 125.

such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that paper.⁹³

Here in this moment, as Huck cycles through a series of vivid memories of the man who is in every way his best and most-loved friend, Huck's common sense kicks in just in time. He recognizes this as *the* pivotal moment in his life, a moment that will determine each of their fates—not in any hypothetical afterlife, but in *this* one. Huck takes the letter “a-trembling, because [he]’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and [he] knowed it.” Finally, after a brief but decisive moment, Huck says aloud, “All right, then, I’ll go to hell,” and tears the letter up.

This is the point of no return, the point at which Huck fully commits to rejecting the societal norms of his community by dedicating his actions toward the ultimate end of aiding Jim’s escape to freedom. He also understands the supposed consequences for doing so—aiding a runaway slave was not only illegal, it was considered deviant, morally abhorrent behavior in the mid-19th century South. Moreover, the odds of successfully escaping together without injury or death were slim—the novel began just a hair’s breadth from the Illinois border (which would have been dotted with slavecatchers),⁹⁴ and Twain’s central conceit of placing his protagonists on an engineless raft that keeps

⁹³ HF 270.

⁹⁴ See James Tackach, “Why Does Jim Not Escape to Illinois in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, vol. 97, no. 3, pp 216 – 225.

taking them deeper south makes their prospects for success very unlikely. Huck's willingness to risk such a fate for the sake of Jim, whom he has been taught to view as nothing more than property, rides entirely on the fact that Huck has come to recognize Jim's humanity, understanding that, whether this white southern God approves or not, the only moral option for Huck is to aid in Jim's escape. As such, he commits himself to doing so "and never thought no more about reforming."

The Trouble with Huck Finn

If teaching *Huck Finn* seems difficult, that is because *Huck Finn* is a difficult text. A satire of stunning dexterity, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is so masterfully objectionable that it could find the most vociferous critics in any century, let alone one so rife with pedants as our own. It is a children's book by careful design, but that design is not to soften or excuse the horrors of the antebellum South; it is to introduce children to these horrors in a way that provides a foothold for thinking critically about not only the societal infrastructures that dominate their lives but also about how to navigate them with humanity and conscientiousness.

While it was a success on publication and found its way into virtually every English classroom in the United States by the early to mid-20th century, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has dramatically fallen out of favor in recent decades. While the demographics and political orientations of its detractors have morphed, critics have always most vocally taken issue with its language as a matter of ideological principle. Though its immediate critics thought the novel "vulgar," with its belligerent disregard for grammar and heretical tone toward religion, today's readers view the novel's relentless use of the n-word as its cardinal sin, often to the point of refusing to engage with the text whatsoever, considering the presence of such language enough to render the text irredeemable. In the kind of ironic twist that Twain

himself might have conjured up, the reasons for outrage over his *magnum opus* have completely turned themselves upside-down in the century-and-a-half since its publishing. While readers in Twain's own time were aghast at his unapologetically antiracist views, readers in our own are shocked by his racist ones. Today, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is all but absent from English classrooms nationwide.

As a satire of the highest order, *Huck Finn* lampoons every level of Huck's sociocultural order, scrutinizing and ultimately subverting societal attitudes towards religion, wealth, and education. Of all the conventional attitudes, societal norms, and power dynamics that Twain critiques, none are more prominently or relentlessly explored than those surrounding race, which, as a child coming of age, Huck is learning to scrutinize according to his own judgment in real time as he ventures down the Mississippi. Set in the mid-1840s but published in 1885, *Huck Finn* was an obvious excoriation of the entrenched attitudes inherited from the antebellum South, which, by the time the novel was published, had reverted to codifying white supremacy into law despite the War and Reconstruction. By the moral standards of "polite" society, Huck Finn's attitudes and behaviors are unacceptable in both Twain's century and our own, with the issue of race as their inflection point.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is not a novel problematized by race. It is a novel that is *about* race. Nothing makes this point more firmly than in the novel's liberal dispensation of the dreaded n-word, now widely considered the most vulgar and offensive word in American English.⁹⁵ It appears 212 times in the novel, with the relatively tame—albeit still cruelly clinical—word "slave" appearing only eleven times by contrast.⁹⁶ It has been argued about at length

⁹⁵ I make this claim from the perspective of both a 21st century *sensus communis* as well as a reflective, common-sense judgment. The final judgment in this case is the same from either approach.

⁹⁶ David Sloane, "The N-Word in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Reconsidered." *The Mark Twain Annual*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014, 71.

whether or not this was necessary for Twain to do this; he likely thought so, the attention to authentic representation of southern language patterns being among his chief concerns. In the 21st century, Mark Twain—as well as Huck Finn—may be considered unapologetic racists. But by the standards of the 19th century, this is simply not a sufficient characterization of the novel’s attitudes toward and treatment of race.

The crux of the matter is that, barring the word “slave,” the n-word was the *only* general term to describe a black person in Huck’s environment. There is no way around that, and this being a 19th century novel, it cannot reasonably be argued that Twain could not have used another word in its place without the novel reading very strangely. While there is no use tap-dancing around this most difficult of subjects, that has not stopped people from trying. One extreme approach removed the “n” word from the text altogether, replacing it where necessary with the more clinical “slave.”⁹⁷ While the “slave Jim” edition of *Huck Finn* (and the “robot Jim”⁹⁸ edition that parodied it) might have been well-intentioned, it missed the point altogether and replaced the offending noun with an arguably worse one, for whatever the relative demerits of each term have when compared to one another may be, this much is certain: *Jim is not a slave*.

Not at his core, anyway, and not within the text of the novel. He is at times held captive and is always a fugitive, but barring a few expository incidents in the novel’s early chapters, the reader hardly sees Jim in the context of his life as an enslaved person. We see him as an

⁹⁷ See Alan Gribben, ed., *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: The NewSouth Edition*, NewSouth Books, 2011. The issues here are difficult since neither the customary language nor the law allowed for a black person to be a legal person, and that still applies with the substitution ‘slave.’ Slaves were *property*, not ‘persons.’

⁹⁸ After the “Slave Jim” edition was released, a parody edit was released that replaced the n-word with the word “robot” to highlight the unworkability of the exercise in the first place. See Etta Devine and Gabriel Diani, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Robotic Edition*, Diani and Devine Press, 2011.

impromptu runaway companion, as a compassionate elder figure, as a loving and remorseful father, and even as a man reduced to humiliation by minstrelsy. But we do not see a slave. We may see a man enslaved by a vicious system of capital, and even if Jim understands where he stands in that system, he does not capitulate his agency. “Yes; en I’s rich now, come to look at it,” Jim says to Huck. “I owns mysef, en I’s wuth eight hund’d dollars.”⁹⁹

What can be said is this: if readers find themselves uncomfortable with the language and themes within the book’s pages, it is because that is precisely Twain’s intent. As a satire exploring society’s normalized cruelties, *Huckleberry Finn* deliberately provokes moral outrage, disbelief, and visceral reactions in its own readers. Ideological approaches that primarily judge the text against a set of moral standards associated with contemporary literary criticism fundamentally misinterpret the literary strategy at play. Twain’s project is to ruthlessly scrutinize a complex nexus of social conventions, attitudes, institutions, and power dynamics that shaped the human experience in the South, black and white. His master stroke—as well as his gravest transgression, as it were—consists in confronting us with the everyday inhumanities that otherwise passed without notice.

Therefore, while it can be admitted that Huck’s attitudes are racist by conditioning, engaging as he does in more than a few commonplace racist tropes within the novel’s pages, it cannot be overlooked that the racist worldview in the South was the default one. Any antiracism in this environment would not only be of foreign sociocultural influence, but it would put one in direct confrontation with the *sensus communis* in ways that could land one in real trouble, if not physical danger. Huck plainly does, however, come to recognize the injustices embedded in his society and consciously places himself in danger, risking damnation itself, to advance the ultimate cause of Jim’s freedom, but we cannot

⁹⁹ In Twain’s typically wry style, Jim immediately proceeds to consider the practical, if ironic, implications of his view: “‘I wisht I had de money, I wouldn’t want no mo’.” (HF 57).

make the mistake of thinking that the received racial attitudes of a boy in Huck's position is something that can be sloughed off like an old coat.

The novel has also been condemned for its rather extraordinary ending, which has drawn the ire of critics everywhere and earned the scorn of even some of the novel's greatest defenders. With Tom Sawyer's miraculous reappearance, the revelation of Jim's freedom, and the cockamamie nature of Tom's "escape" plan to free Jim, *Huckleberry Finn* takes something of a turn into outlandish farce in the last few chapters, an opinion that is echoed throughout the body of literature on the novel. Twain has been accused of appending a haphazard deus ex machina to the conclusion of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The improbable reunion of Huck and Tom Sawyer, facilitated by a chance encounter at Tom's extended family's farm, has been a point of contention for many critics. Esteemed voices like Ernest Hemingway and Leo Marx have expressed their disdain for the novel's ending. Hemingway was so annoyed by the ending that he advised readers to stop at the point where Jim is kidnapped and turned in by the king and the duke, declaring, "That is the real end. The rest is just cheating."¹⁰⁰

The novel's "happy" ending revolves around two broad conceits and both are beyond implausible. The first, of course, is the astronomical coincidence that, after drifting "all the way down the river, eleven hundred mile,"¹⁰¹ Jim and Huck end up on a farmstead owned by Tom Sawyer's distant family, which allows Tom himself to make an appearance in the novel's final chapters. The other is Miss Watson's sudden, seemingly inexplicable decision to free Jim in her will. Throughout the novel, Jim's monetary "value" fluctuates between \$800 and \$1,000¹⁰²—not an insignificant sum in the context of the era.

¹⁰⁰ Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 23.

¹⁰¹ HF 358.

¹⁰² HF 57, 353.

The notion that a wealthy individual like Miss Watson would suddenly feel more deeply for Jim's humanity than for the state of her holdings is utterly implausible without Miss Watson having undergone some variety of profound moral episode.

According to Tom Sawyer's account, however, this is exactly what happened. His account is brief but pivotal: "Old Miss Watson died two months ago, and she was ashamed she ever was going to sell him down the river, and said so; and she set him free in her will."¹⁰³ We have no further explanation of how Miss Watson came to that decision. But regardless of Miss Watson's moral reflection, Twain is pointing out the fundamental (and legal) truth of the matter: that *only* Miss Watson can free Jim. Whatever brought about Miss Watson's change of heart is not germane—what was necessary was that she have it, and that we see its necessity for Jim's freedom: in the eyes of the social order, Jim can never be free until Miss Watson says he is.

Despite its presentation as a children's novel, Twain's extraordinary decision to introduce a runaway slave as the protagonist's companion character almost dooms Huck's adventures to tragedy from the very beginning. The likelihood of Jim's successful escape is low, and the fact that Twain chose a raft floating downstream on the Mississippi River—deeper and deeper into slave country—as Huck and Jim's means of conveyance only lessens the chances that Jim will ever make it to freedom. Twain just as easily could have avoided the fog at Cairo altogether, had Huck and Jim turned north at the Ohio River, and carried on their adventures toward Pennsylvania. But instead, he put them on a raft and plunged them further into danger, so deep, in fact, that it became virtually impossible for them to escape.

The reason for this, I believe, is that Twain wants to draw our attention to the contemporaneous hopelessness of a satisfactory

¹⁰³ HF 357. Of course, Tom is also a bit of a scoundrel in his own right, so the reader can take his testimony as they will.

resolution to the institutionalized racism in the South. *Huckleberry Finn* laments that there is no way out of danger for the likes of Huck or Jim. What Miss Watson's decision to free Jim demonstrates is an ultimate truth, as Twain saw it, regarding race relations in the South, which was this: for there to be a peaceful transition to a more just and equitable future, it would have required, on the part of white Americans everywhere, a complete reversal in character, behavior, and attitude toward black Americans. In other words, it would take a miracle.¹⁰⁴

The idea that the rights of black people in 19th century America ultimately depended on the willful capitulation of whites is anathema to contemporary academic liberalism, with echoes of the kind of white saviorism that just will not do in our current century. This is irrelevant to Twain's material. The axes of power, capital, and sheer brute force all aligned in favor of white people, making the notion that it could be "overcome" entirely against their will, in Twain's estimation, absurd. Instead, it underscores the immense challenges faced by those who dared to defy the status quo in pursuit of justice and equality, and the hopelessness of trying to move against such a force. Like its central motif and metaphor—the Mississippi River—it is a mighty and insurmountable force that can be navigated only very carefully. In terms of reflective judgment, however, the point is that the effect lies not in empirical force but in freedom of choice, no matter how rare it is.

Though Miss Watson's freeing of Jim in her will is a convenient plot device that spares the reader the unbearable thought of an ending in which Jim is returned to slavery, it is not merely that. It is also an uncomfortable commentary on the societal transformation required in

¹⁰⁴ Latin *mīrāculum* ("object of wonder"), from *mīror* ("to wonder at"), from *mīrus* ("wonderful"), from Proto-Indo-European *(s)meyh-* ("to smile, to be astonished"). It might be suggested that this "miracle" was what reflective judgment, when an actual narrative is imagined, can bring about—something incredible to behold.

19th-century America, particularly in the South, and for that matter, continues to this day. Twain is suggesting here that for Black people to be treated with fairness, equality, and respect in the United States, there had to be a seismic shift in the moral consciousness—and the *sensus communis*—of white people everywhere. This kind of change of heart would require nothing less than a conversion of Pauline proportions, like that of the Apostle Paul, in the hearts and minds of every power broker in the South, and indeed, anyone with a stake in the plantation economy. By 1885, Twain saw that beating the South into oblivion was not enough to alter their entrenched prejudices. They were going to have to do some serious work on themselves to heal their culture and society—until then, all their pretenses toward respectability, gentility, and piousness rang as hollow as those priests who “dress the wounds of my people as though it were not serious, saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ when there is no peace.”¹⁰⁵

*You got to go to the lonesome valley
 You got to go there by yourself
 Nobody else can go for you
 You got to go there by yourself*

*You got to ask the Lord's forgiveness
 Nobody else can ask Him for you*

*You got to go to the lonesome valley
 You got to go there by yourself
 Nobody else, nobody else can go for you
 You got to go there by yourself¹⁰⁶*

¹⁰⁵ Jer. 6:14; 8:11.

¹⁰⁶ Anonymous, “Lonesome Valley,” American folk song. Recorded by Fairfield Four, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Original Motion Picture Soundtrack (2000). First recorded 1927 by David Miller.

Twain's project in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is not to prescribe definitive solutions to the societal issues he critiques. However, he does propose a starting point for addressing the racial problems that beleaguer the South, which is to strip away the pretense of societal roles in order to engage with one another as human beings. Huck and Jim are never happier than when they are left alone, drifting down the river, talking under the stars.

Sometimes we'd have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time. Yonder was the banks and the islands, across the water; and maybe a spark—which was a candle in a cabin window; and sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two—on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming over from one of them crafts. It's lovely to live on a raft.¹⁰⁷

* * *

The central conflict in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* lies in the tension between Huck's capacity for reasoned reflective judgment—his common sense—and the societal norms that surround him. As an educational tool, the novel is fundamentally about this tension between one's ability to critically assess a situation and the societal narratives one has been taught. When faced with decisions of significant consequence, Huck often finds that his best judgment is at odds with the prevailing societal consensus, making it an exceptional educational

¹⁰⁷ HF 158.

tool for demonstrating *thinking for oneself* contra *sensus communis* without getting lost in theoretical sticking points. Narrated in the first person and replete with introspective monologues, *Huckleberry Finn* is primarily a narrative of personal reflection in the face of outlandish events and cruel societal conventions. Spared the burden of an overly ideological upbringing, Huck's decisions are grounded in practicality, empathy, and mercy. He makes practical, aesthetic judgments based on who is harmed by the events unfolding around him and what the nature and extent of that harm might be. His ethical decisions are not dictated by conventional standards of behavior but are derived from his ability to imagine himself in another's position.

Huck Finn's success as a coming-age-story cannot be understated; though the novel's action takes place over the course of just a few months in Huck's early adolescence, he does more growing and reflecting in that short period than most of us manage in a lifetime. This is owed in part to the material conditions of Huck's life, but to the fact that Huck really does not have much of a choice but to face head-on the most explosive issues of his century and of the century since. In fact, children of about Huck's age are the ideal audience for Twain's message. They are in a formative period, often internally questioning authority and societal norms but frequently unable to voice such questions freely. Children in the South, especially, would have witnessed all manners of horrors committed in the name of upholding the status quo while still attending church on Sundays. These readers, more than any, would have needed a signal that the daily horrors they observed *were*, in fact, horrors, that they *were* absurd, and we are *not* wrong to interrogate them.

5. Lest Ye Be Judged: Money, Trust, and Character in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*

With much communication he will tempt thee; he will smile upon thee, and speak thee fair, and say What wantest thou? If thou be for his profit he will use thee; he will make thee bare, and will not be sorry for it. Observe and take good heed. When thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep.

—SIRACH 13: 1-14¹⁰⁸

At the outset of Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*, an apparent deaf-mute sets foot aboard the *Fidèle*, a Mississippi steamboat preparing to embark downriver from St. Louis, Missouri. The man carries no luggage with him, nor is he accompanied by any traveling companions. He demonstrates no sense of belonging whatsoever: "From the shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wonderings of the crowd, it was plain that he was in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger." Carrying nothing but a blank slate, the stranger moves throughout the ship until he happens upon a notice warning of a "mysterious imposter, supposed to have recently arrived from the East," beside which he decides to take his place. Then, writing on his slate while standing right beside the "wanted" placard, the deaf-mute turns his slate to the crowd to reveal the words:

¹⁰⁸ Melville presents an editorialized version of this text in Chapter 45 through the voice of Frank Goodman, the *Cosmopolitan*, who, reading from the old man's Bible, not only cherry-picks lines but rearranges them without explanation.

“Charity thinketh no evil.”¹⁰⁹

With this juxtaposition between the report of a known swindler’s possible presence and the reminder that—at least from St. Paul’s perspective—a moral spirit is a trusting one, Melville practically dares us, at the outset, to trust his innocuous but suspicious stranger despite our instincts, if indeed it is his purpose to play the swindler. He seems harmless enough, and being noncommunicative, the passersby are allowed to project whatever attitudes they like toward the sincerity of his evangelism. He cannot hear anyone judging him, nor can he engage in any conversation, honest or not. Melville provides no additional context for interpreting his message except to allude to the man in cream-colors’ own sense of trust in the world around him, no small amount of which would be required to fall asleep soundly on the deck of a busy steamboat, as Melville’s stranger does, before the first chapter concludes.

After introducing this stranger, Melville immediately seizes upon the reader’s sense of irony as he shifts focus to the boat’s barber, who is setting up shop for the day and among whose various pieces of signage hangs the particularly stern message to the public:

“NO TRUST.”¹¹⁰

“Trust,” in this context, refers to credit in a financial sense¹¹¹—the message being that the barber will not serve customers on the promise

¹⁰⁹ Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade. The Writings of Herman Melville: The Northwestern-Newberry Edition*, edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, Northwestern University Press, 1984.

¹¹⁰ *CM* 5.

¹¹¹ In practice, credit is probably the first and oldest incarnation of what eventually become the more “civilized” monetary systems used in more recent centuries. The practice of “borrowing” goods or services in return for payment received in the future extends to the earliest records of agricultural civilization—in much of Mesopotamia, for example, a balance on most goods or services could

to pay later. There being no way of ascertaining a customer's creditworthiness in real time on a riverboat full of strangers coming and going in the mid-19th century, the barber has done the prudent thing. Its presence here reflects the private history of a professional tradesman whose trust had been abused in the past by honest-looking customers promising to pay for his services the next day, only to disappear into obscurity immediately upon their exit. "Charity may thinketh no evil," says the barber's sign, but his shop is not a charity.

The dual meanings of the word "trust"¹¹² being so immediately thrust before us, Melville invites us (à la Dylan's ruminations on the word "house"¹¹³) to reflect extensively on what it means to trust in something, be it an idea, a person, an institution, or any other suitable concept. He offers few signals to indicate a correct "way" of interpreting the subject except to present us in the first chapter with these two attitudes at polar ends of the field—the one who suggests we "thinketh no evil" versus the one who does so under no circumstance. The barber's motivations in this context are clear: he is there to make a living by providing a service, and he does not play games in doing so. As to this strange traveler, however, we are left to wonder at his

be paid in barley or wheat at the end of each harvest season. Keeping track of who owed what to whom, however, required formal, agreed-upon records of the deal and a standard unit of exchange to measure everything in. Financial instruments, in their infancy, did not depend on gold or silver or barter economies. They ran on *writing* (i.e., on intricate records of perishable goods of real value—barley, wheat, beer, and so on), as they still do today (see William N. Goetzmann, "Finance and Writing" in *Money Changes Everything: How Finance Made Civilization Possible*, Princeton, 2016, pp. 19-30).

¹¹² Etymologically speaking, "trust" derives from the Old Norse *traust* (confidence, faith, trust), from the Proto-Germanic *traustą* ("firm, strong") itself from Proto-Indo-European *deru-*, *drew-*, *drū-* ("to be firm, hard, solid"). Its theorized common usage in PIE, *dōru*, means "tree." To trust something means to understand it to be solid, even rooted.

¹¹³ "We all have a different idea of all the words we're using, y'know... I really can't take it too seriously because everything—like if I say the word "house," we're both going to see a different house. If I just say the word, right? So, we're using all these other words like 'mass production' and 'movie magazine' and we all have a different idea of these words too, so I don't even know what we're saying." See "Bob Dylan Gives Press Conference in San Francisco, Part II: The second half of the interview Dylan gave in 1965 at KQED." *Rolling Stone*, January 1965.

purpose. It is possible that he is soliciting alms, but if so, he does so only implicitly and in the reserved style of Theravada mendicant. He may be a wayward proselytizer, but not a very effective one, being mostly noncommunicative. Soon he drifts into a relatively peaceful sleep “in a retired spot on the forecastle,” which he does, as Melville’s narrator points out, at great personal risk, “by stealing into retirement, and there going asleep and continuing so, he seemed to have courted oblivion, a boon not often withheld from so humble an applicant as he.” After a few “epitaphic comments, conflictingly spoken or thought, of a miscellaneous company” concerning his oddness, Melville leaves this stranger to slumber in utter ignorance of his surroundings before moving from him entirely.

If we take the juxtaposition of the stranger’s and the barber’s respective attitudes toward trust as a barometer of what such attitudes can be in their absolutes, there emerges a startling spectrum between certainty and ambiguity: the barber’s policy, “No Trust,” is absolute in its refutation. No trust means no trust; as a policy, he does not make exceptions. The stranger’s meaning, however, is full of ambiguities, with his chief motive being a mystery—without a sense of what his purpose is within this context, we can only speculate as to who he might be. Invoking St. Paul’s exhortations of “charity” in 1 Corinthians 13, the stranger’s purpose may first appear to be that of a panhandler, but we never see him take a dime, nor even hold out his hat. Further, though the standard King James Bible (undoubtedly the text with which Melville would have been most familiar) presents this concept as “charity,” this translation is contentious. Laden as it is with the connotation of alms, the original Greek, *ἀγάπη* (106gape), is not limited to the contemporary sense of charity but, more broadly, refers to a sense of love for humankind, or a love for God that manifests itself in performing acts of goodwill toward one’s neighbor.

But as the deaf-mute slips into slumber and the barber sets up shop, Melville shifts the focus away from these two polar ends of the spectrum of trust and toward another figure who, though his motives

remain shrouded throughout the text, will test the capacity for faith of every character he crosses.

* * *

The Confidence-Man takes place on April Fools' Day, 1857—the same day the book was published—aboard a riverboat steaming down the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans, onboarding and offboarding countless passengers at every stop along the way. Set between the hours of dawn and midnight, the “narrative,” such as it is, follows an ambiguous, possibly shapeshifting figure circulating throughout the corridors of the ship and engaging in provocative dialogues with its various passengers. In the simplest cases, he merely wants money and works his loquacious charm to part fools from theirs; in more serious exchanges, however, he eagerly engages in lofty, semi-philosophical dialogues on the virtues of “confidence.” Its setting on April Fool's Day on a boat drifting from town to town is appropriate—the central conceit of the “holiday” is that everyone is at least low-key aware that anyone around could be playing a trick on them at any time, but it nevertheless being necessary to venture out into the world to conduct the day's business, everyone still goes along for the ride.

The plotless action of *The Confidence-Man* revolves around a central figure, a shape-shifting “confidence-man” of unclear motives—but with an obsessive fixation on the notion of “confidence” in fellow human beings—who flits from scene to scene aboard the riverboat, engaging other passengers in lengthy discussions in which he attempts to demonstrate, from various perspectives, that having confidence in one another is of unsurpassed importance in all social affairs. Often, but not always, the conversation culminates in the confidence-man

asking for money, whether in the form of alms,¹¹⁴ or a loan,¹¹⁵ or an investment,¹¹⁶ but always under the presumption of “confidence” that the money is really going toward that which the confidence-man claims it is. He appears under various guises—a philanthropist, an herb-doctor, a stockbroker, and more.

At a glance, the eponymous confidence-man occupying Melville’s attention would appear to be a standard grifter operating aboard a ship of strangers, all of whom will soon disembark at their respective destinations and then be seen no more. Melville practically dares us to assume as much, providing his text, as he does, with a singular proper noun as a title and the ambiguous “His Masquerade” as a subtitle, placing the presumption of disguise and false pretense immediately at the fore of the novel. At least one standard reading of the text is that the various avatars of the so-called “confidence-man” are the assorted disguises of a single character undergoing a “masquerade,” and indeed there are a number of signals that Melville employs to prime the reader to suspect this very conceit: from the very word “masquerade” in the title, to the description of a wanted poster advertising the reward for “a mysterious imposter, supposed to have recently arrived from the East”¹¹⁷ on the first page. However, if it is substantial textual evidence that this is indeed the same imposter in a series of disguises that we are seeking, Melville’s text leaves much to be desired. The sheer logistical challenge of making the necessary wardrobe changes without being detected would require a Sisyphean suspension of disbelief, and with only minor exceptions,¹¹⁸ there is virtually no textual evidence that this

¹¹⁴ See *CM*, Chapter 7 “A gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons,” pp. 35-42.

¹¹⁵ See *CM*, Chapter 12, “Story of the unfortunate man, from which may be gathered whether or not he has been justly so entitled,” pp. 60-63.

¹¹⁶ See *CM*, Chapter 9, “Two businessmen transact a little business,” pp. 46-51.

¹¹⁷ *CM* 3.

¹¹⁸ The black guinea snagging Mr Robert’s business card and John Ringman “somehow” having it immediately after is really the most telling episode; it suggests cooperation between the two but not identity. In fact, given that these episodes happen in fairly quick succession of events, it is

is what is consistently happening throughout the book. Indeed, the only real evidence that these figures may be the same person, beyond their propensity for ornate, Melvillean syntax, is their bizarre obsession with the notion of confidence.

The Confidence-Man is a perplexing work of fiction and one that requires extensive reflective judgment to make sense of. Not exactly a novel (or even a story, for that matter), Melville's non-narrative fiction defies categorization at every turn, as does its parade of characters who, at any given point, may or may not be the same figure in various disguises. Its complex syntax, stagnant "plot" structure, wayward philosophizing, and inscrutable characters make it inherently resistant to neat, easily interpretable readings. But that has not stopped critics from trying. However, many of these readings, while insightful, fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of the text. This is to say, they are inconsistent with the entirety of the novel, often focusing too narrowly on certain aspects while neglecting others. One common pitfall is the tendency to oversimplify the character of the confidence-man himself. One common interpretation—made popular by Herschel Parker in his notes on the *Norton Critical Edition*¹¹⁹—is that he is a straightforward embodiment of the Devil, and that his quest for "confidence" is an allegorical appeal for the passengers' Souls. Bruce Franklin¹²⁰, like Parker, also leans towards a theological interpretation of the confidence-man, albeit with a broader scope. Franklin incorporating global myth and faith traditions into his analysis,

far more plausible that these are two people working together and not the same figure changing disguises. See *CM* 17.

¹¹⁹ Herschel Parker's work on the second Norton critical edition of *The Confidence-Man* is the most consistent and egregious offender, stating plainly in the back matter: "As the Mississippi steamboat *Fidèle* (Faith) goes downriver on April Fool's Day, the Devil, appealing for confidence, engages passengers in dizzying philosophical, social, and religious disquisitions" (Herschel Parker and Mark Niemeyer, eds., *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, W.W. Norton and Co., 2006, back matter. See also Parker, "The Confidence Man's Masquerade," Norton, 2006.

¹²⁰ See "Introduction," *The Confidence-Man*, ed. Bruce Franklin (United Kingdom: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007, xxiv-xxvii.

presenting the confidence-man as a mythical, cross-cultural religious archetype à la Lévi-Straussian “deep structures” and suggesting that the confidence-man represents a universal figure found across cultural narratives. Cornell West, for his part, offers a unique interpretation of the confidence-man’s “black guinea” persona by characterizing him as a “jazz-like figure,” suggesting a sense of improvisation and spontaneity. According to West, this character is constantly “on the ropes,” navigating a precarious existence using “smoke and mirrors,” not just to survive, but to maintain his sanity, dignity, compassion, and hope amid catastrophe.¹²¹ While West’s interpretation is novel and evocative, it is too abstract and detached from the text. His equivocation of the black guinea’s worldview with jazz can be viewed as a metaphorical embellishment that strays from a grounded analysis of the character within the context of the novel and more towards West’s preferred rhetorical style.

While these interpretations capture one aspect of the character or another, they fail to account for his role as a catalyst for the exploration of trust, deception, and ultimately character. *The Confidence-Man* is not merely a deceiver; he is also a truth-teller—his point about the necessity of confidence is not overblown, even if his language is. However, it does no one any favors, least of all students of literature *or* philosophy, to shoehorn the particulars of difficult texts into a prescribed system (or theory) of interpretive frameworks. Therefore, it is crucial to approach *The Confidence-Man* without a “template” for making sense of it, instead appreciating its complexity and resisting the temptation to oversimplify or force it into a predetermined interpretive framework.

We can say, however, that it is interested in at least two things: the first, as the novel asserts time and again, is that the importance of trust

¹²¹ Cornel West and D. Graham Burnett, “Metaphysics, Money & the Messiah: A Conversation about Melville’s ‘The Confidence-Man,’” *Daedalus* 136, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 114.

in the functioning of society cannot be overstated. Civilization is built on the bedrock of confidence that all (or at least most) people will mostly fulfill their obligations. It underpins transactions, fuels investments, and allows for the development of commerce, infrastructure, and public works. It provides the footing for cooperation, promotes social cohesion, and facilitates peaceful coexistence. It is the lubricant that smooths social interactions and the bond that ties individuals together into a collective whole. It is also delicate, easily shattered, and difficult to repair once broken. That leads directly to the novel's second core theme: this is the problem of dealing with breaches of trust, which happen frequently enough to call the whole idea of trust itself into question. The confidence-man represents both an affirmation of and a challenge to this trust. He exploits it for his own gain, and his success depends on the willingness of his victims to trust him. The reader's uncertainty regarding his motivations and identity serves as a reminder that living in any society means maintaining a constant balance between our need to trust our fellow human beings while also acknowledging that no one we meet can immediately be trusted.

Thus, while the "protagonist" of Melville's *The Confidence-Man* implores us to absolute "confidence" in all things, the novel itself must not be misinterpreted as a pseudo-inspirational text in the grand tradition of the American self-help book. Instead, the novel presents a nuanced exploration of these concepts, juxtaposing them against their counterparts: fear, suspicion, and doubt. It probes the practical implications of trust and confidence, not just as abstract ideals, but as complex constructs that operate within the realities of human interaction and societal dynamics. The Confidence-Man, as a character, operates at the intersection of these tensions. The novel, therefore, offers a critical examination of how trust functions in society, and the potential consequences when it is manipulated or broken. It is a reflection on the delicate balance between faith and skepticism, and the constant negotiation between trust and doubt that underpins human

relationships and societal structures. Maintaining this equilibrium, we shall see, is a constant and conscious effort—a key point to bear in mind at the novel’s close, in which the confidence man, now in the guise of “the cosmopolitan,” engages in his final dialogue with an old man desperately in need of some rest.

The Confidence-Man is also deeply concerned with money, which frequently emerges as the central object of the protagonist’s eloquent solicitations—the very representation, as it were, of confidence, quantified and made fungible. The confidence man’s manipulations and deceptions often revolve around money, underscoring its role as a core unit of trust. For this reason, the novel is not infrequently cited in works on 19th-century American capitalism—historian Stephen Mihm, for example, offers a limited interpretation of the novel as “a parable of the market economy and the paradoxical forces that kept it alive.”¹²² And while *The Confidence-Man* can easily be seen as a critique of the emergent free-wheeling financial system of its time, it is far more interesting to view the novel’s economic complexities as the backdrop against which Melville explores something more deeply human.

Contrary to what Melville’s protagonist insists, “confidence” is not something one can simply conjure up and give away. It is not a gift freely given but a responsibility earned. As social primates, humans have evolved over millennia to thrive in groups—divvying up essential labors, contributing according to our abilities, and caring for those in need of care, and so on. However, for most of our history as a species, *Homo sapiens* lived in groups small enough for each member to know one another and understand one another’s roles within the community. That trust, however, is only upheld insofar as those entrusted with its responsibilities are willing to execute upon them. In other words, trust

¹²² See Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States*, Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 4-5.

only functions as long as trusted actors can demonstrate the ability to do those things that they are trusted to do.

Civilization, however, necessitates the coexistence of thousands of individuals, mostly strangers, operating in tandem with one another within the same social, economic, and legal structures. People may constantly circulate in and out of other people's lives within the context of a civilization, whereas for much of our history, human beings may only have had to interact with a few hundred others over the course of their entire lives. Civilization requires that we place all of the critical tasks associated with keeping us alive into the hands of strangers. The riverboat setting of *The Confidence-Man* serves as an apt metaphor for this dynamic, with its passengers constantly circulating on and off board as the *Fidèle* steams from port to port, functioning as a microcosm of the diverse array of people now coming to populate the heart of the continent. This constant flux creates an environment where, like the developing businesses and economies of the American West in 1857, trust among the ever-changing set of strangers is scarce. The riverboat, with its transient population adrift in one of North America's mightiest natural resources—the Mississippi River—mirrors a broader society where anyone could be anyone and where those who vouch for others could themselves be anyone.

Confidence Games

Set in 1857, *The Confidence-Man* takes place in the heart of the American Free Banking Era, the period from 1837 to 1863, during which time the U.S. had no national central bank. By this point, both the First and Second Banks of the United States had come and gone, each created by the growing nation's demand for capital and later

dismantled by partisan politics.¹²³ Still, the demand for money (and the continual lack of it) had been a near-constant problem in the United States since the early colonial era. Gold and silver, still the preferred “hard money” of the day,¹²⁴ were always in short supply, but the appetite for cultivating all manner of business, industry, and agricultural investments required capital to match demand. Furthermore, many founders and early statesmen—particularly those of the northern business class—saw a powerful financial system as a safeguard against foreign hostility in the global economy.¹²⁵ If the United States could prove itself as a valuable business partner to its old-world predecessors, it could further ensure its own national security.

The necessity of a viable monetary policy, then, was of utmost importance in the early republic. War debts notwithstanding, “settling” the nation’s newly acquired lands by filling them with farms, financing them with newly formed domestic banks, and supplying them with newly built industries all required a reliable, easily accessible, and, above all, relatively stable medium of exchange. However, the means for producing such a financial instrument were hardly encoded in U.S. policy, even if the framers did anticipate the need for the federal government to hold some sway over the money supply. Constitutional

123 See Sharon Ann Murphy, *Other People’s Money: How Banking Worked in the Early American Republic*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017, 17-20.

124 “Hard money” is differentiated from bills of credit and refers to fixed, tangible units of value, typically precious metals—gold, silver, and so on. Melville previously evoked the allure of so-called hard money in Chapter 36 of *Moby-Dick*, in which Ahab appeals to his men by promising a “sixteen dollar piece” of gold to “whosoever of [them] raises me that same white whale, he shall have this gold ounce,” which he then nails to the mast. The sturdiness of the coin, emphasized by its steadfast ability to stay in place throughout the *Pequod*’s voyage without deteriorating—something that could never be expected of a banknote, which would hardly last an hour in a storm. In Chapter 99 Melville provides a lengthy description of the coin that has allowed numismatists to identify it as an Ecuadorian 8 escudos doubloon, which were minted in Quito between 1838 and 1843. \$16 being worth between \$570 and \$600 in 2023, the reward would have been substantial for petty sailors, but Melville could have only speculated at the longevity of the coin’s value: in today’s market, the 1838 Ecuadorian 8 escudos doubloon can fetch between \$30,000 and \$45,000.

125 Murphy, 29-37.

constraints strictly reserved the right to “coin” money to the federal government to hold some sway over the money supply. Constitutional constraints strictly reserved the right to “coin” money to the federal government,¹²⁶ but without a national bank, the government’s ability to extend credit was strictly curtailed. Further complicating the matter was a provision in Article 10 of the Constitution that forbade the states from issuing money of any kind, either metallic specie or bills of credit: “No state shall... [C]oin Money; emit Bills of Credit; make any Thing but gold and silver Coin a Tender in Payment of Debts...”¹²⁷ But booming markets abhor a vacuum as much as nature ever did. As the central banking system had already failed (twice) and the states effectively sat with their hands tied, the private sector soon did what it does best and found a reasonable workaround

The breakthrough came in the form of state-chartered banks, private financial institutions that obtained permission from their state to incorporate but otherwise effectively had free rein to issue credit as they saw fit. These banks were technically free to issue their own notes, which were effectively bills of credit that promised a certain redemption in gold or silver to the bearer. Oversight was lax, however, and notes were usually only fractionally reserved at best, meaning redeeming them for specie could be a cumbersome, if not impossible, procedure. In Michigan, for example, banks issued notes that could only be redeemed at remote, rural locations, and attempting to do so was a gamble on the best of days. State bank commissioner (and future governor and senator) Alpheus Felch is said to have inspected one such bank only to find that its “cash reserves” consisted of several boxes of

126 Note the difference: “bullion” refers to bulk units of highly refined precious metals; “specie” refers specifically to coins minted from such metals, although typically at lower levels of purity.

127 U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 10, Clause 1.

nails and glass, lightly sprinkled with a handful of silver coins for show.¹²⁸

The tumultuous economic landscape of the mid-19th century was further complicated by President Andrew Jackson's Specie Circular of 1836, an executive order, that mandated public lands be purchased with gold or silver. This decree sent shockwaves through the markets, casting doubt on the real value of paper money and triggering a series of bank defaults in the 1840s. The precariousness of this financial system was underscored by the lack of coordinated oversight and the slow pace of communication, with messages often taking days or even weeks to reach their recipients. However, the discovery of gold in California in 1848 brought about a significant increase in the hard money supply, easing the gold shortage in U.S. financial markets and allowing more paper cash to circulate backed by it. The wildcat banking system, characterized by its state-chartered banks free to issue their own fractionally reserved notes, continued to operate with relative impunity.

Melville's novel, in a sense, predicted the financial turmoil that would wreak havoc on the markets later that year. On the morning of August 24, 1857, the president of the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company announced the suspension of payments from its New York branch. The company, an Ohio-based bank with a secondary main office in New York City, held substantial mortgage holdings and served as a liaison to other Ohio investment banks; its sudden insolvency was brought on by internal embezzlement and the failed investments that revealed it. The sudden failures sent shockwaves through the financial system, with the recent installation of the telegraph infrastructure amplifying the crisis to an unprecedented degree. News that would have taken days or weeks to spread just a few years earlier was now instantly communicable. Consequently, the

¹²⁸ See Sumner, William Graham. "A History of Banking in All the Leading Nations." Vol. 1 (The United States). *The Journal of Commerce and Commercial Bulletin*, 1896.

Panic of 1857 is considered the first “global” financial panic. News of redemption refusals, insolvencies, and bankruptcies could reach other financial institutions, investors, and traders within hours. The damage was swift, and the recovery long—the United States economy did not fully recover until it began mobilizing for war in 1860.

Like any other set of interlocking social institutions, markets operate according to their own *sensus communis*, with the whole enterprise built upon assumptions about how this abstract, semi-conscious collective entity called “the market” will process news, events, or rumors. All trades in a market economy happen under some auspices of confidence, that they will yield the intended results for all parties involved, which requires some foresight on all fronts to ascertain how other parties are likely to behave going into a fundamentally unknowable future. When all is well, a market behaves according to how its participants believe it will behave. All contracts specifying future commitments function this way, and the successful execution of a market economy depends on a general faith that the rest of the market will honor its commitments. This provides a framework for some degree of predictability over reasonably long periods of time.¹²⁹

However, when things go awry, the delicate balance of trust and confidence that underpins the market can quickly unravel. This is particularly true in times of economic crisis, when the assumptions that guide market behavior are suddenly called into question. In such situations, the *sensus communis* of the market can shift dramatically, and the collective understanding of what constitutes “normal” market behavior can change overnight, depending on context and

¹²⁹ These only functions properly in the “normal” course of business, however. Black swan events are an ever-present threat, and mitigating against them would become a hallmark of 20th century American financial legislation, including the Federal Reserve Act of 1913, the Securities Act of 1933, and the Securities Exchange Act of 1934.

circumstances. This is particularly true in the American economy, in which the monetary system is not backed by precious metals or any other tangible commodity—it is backed by returns on capital investment. In this system, the value of money is essentially a reflection of the collective faith in the ability of the market to generate future wealth—an easy sell in the 19th century with Manifest Destiny in mind. When that faith is shaken, as it is during a financial crisis, the value of money itself can become unstable. This can lead to a cascade of negative effects, including inflation, defaults, margin calls on bad investments, or even the complete collapse of the monetary system. Therefore, maintaining confidence in the market is not just about ensuring smooth economic transactions, but also about preserving the very value of the currency we use to feed and shelter ourselves. This underscores the profound importance of trust and confidence in the functioning of a market economy, and the potentially catastrophic consequences when that trust is broken.

Confidence Men

“Make money. Honestly if you can—but, by all means, make money.”

—AMERICAN PROVERB¹³⁰

On July 8, 1849, the *New-York Herald*¹³¹ reported in its “Police Intelligence” section that “a man... traveling about the city, known as the ‘Confidence Man’” had been arrested after running a series of scams on passersby that involved persuading his marks that he was a

¹³⁰ Traces its origins to Horace: “*Isne tibi melius suadet, Rem facias rem, Recte si possis, si non, quocumque modo rem*” (“Does he advise you better who says, “Do the thing—morally, if possible, but if not, by all means do it!”) *Epistles* I, 65-66.

¹³¹ See “Arrest of the Confidence Man,” *New-York Herald*, July 8, 1849, in The Lost Museum Archive, American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning, accessed Aug 11, 2024.

forgotten acquaintance and, he being a smooth talker, convincing them to entrust him with an item of value until a future date. To an outside observer, the trick is obvious—the “Confidence Man” is lying, and he will soon abscond with whatever he is entrusted with. Still, he struck again and again, apparently with such efficacy that his gift became known as the hallmark hustle of the New York City streets. Taken together, the illicit career of William Thompson—though known by half a dozen aliases—and the newspaper article that reported his arrest coalesced into the distinctly American concept of the “confidence man.”

Melville was aware of the Thompson affair, and while he clearly had the real-world figure from the newspapers somewhere in his mind, the multiplicity of personalities we find among the *Fidèle*’s operators suggests that Melville is exploring a much older trope than any uniquely American phenomenon. While fraudulently abusing a victim’s trust for gain is as old a trick as there is, the confidence man took on a distinctively American flair in the rapidly expanding nation of the mid-1800s, due largely to hyper-optimistic investment practices that abounded in a continent teeming with natural resources and abundant arable land. The continent’s productive capacity would have made it relatively easy to inspire confidence in potential investors (or marks) in any enterprise that offered to take advantage of America’s productive capacity. Demand for capital and currency dramatically outstripped hard money supplies, leading banks to issue notes with fractional reserves—a confidence trick built directly into the monetary system at a retail level. To fund westward expansion, credit was extended liberally, and personal liability was limited by corporate protections, so risk-taking abounded. Essentially, the entire system relied heavily on confidence that obligations would be repaid.

Further, Melville’s confidence-man is not a simple operator running grifts on strangers. Far from a straight knave, Melville’s confidence man calls to mind the “trickster” character type common to American indigenous oral traditions, who, being bound by (or even

aware of) no particular moral agenda, is able to exist more comfortably alongside the world's nuances, complexities, and ambiguities than his European counterparts, who typically are constructed to exist within rigid and predictable normative structures.¹³² This approach to character type much more adequately applies to Melville's characters than most standard readings, which usually contend that the various con men populating the *Fidèle* are all one and the same. However, there is precious little textual evidence to firmly support this reading. Instead, Melville gives us a bustling riverboat setting, floating through the rural heart of the United States, constantly exchanging passengers as it steams from one major cosmopolitan center to another—a setting that would draw con men like a lightning rod. The *Fidèle*, therefore, has no shortage of them—some of them may be the same figure in different disguises; some may be disparate figures surreptitiously working together, and some of them may be exactly who they say they are. But it would be implausible to assume there is only one on board, and Melville is clearly interested in exploring their many overlaps and distinctions—in some ways, all of these men are exactly the same, but in other ways they could not be more distinct from one another.

Varieties abound, but there is one necessary and sufficient condition for a monetary arrangement to be considered a confidence trick—or “con,” to use the American vernacular—and that is to win the trust of a mark in order to take advantage of it. The operator wins the confidence of the mark to persuade them to divest themselves of money or some other item of value, virtually always on the promise of a return that the operator promises to deliver in the future. The crux of the grift, of course, is that the operator has no intention of delivering on any such promise, and, if they have any skill, they will likely disappear from the mark's life forever. The notion of being entirely unable to track down

¹³² Franchot Ballinger, “Ambigere: The Euro-American Picaro and the Native American Trickster.” *MELUS*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1991, pp. 21–38.

a stranger is alien to a 21st-century perspective, but in the vast Middle American landscape of the 19th century, disappearing forever was not only plausible but rather easy.

While the core con is always the same, the variety of its manifestation, especially in the free-wheeling business environment of the 19th-century United States, is extensive. These “manifestations” of Melville’s confidence-man do not imply that he is the same person each time. Instead, this is a demonstration that a riverboat floating through the rural heart of the United States, constantly exchanging passengers as it steams from one major cosmopolitan center to another, would draw con men like a lightning rod. The *Fidèle*, therefore, has no shortage of them. Through these manifestations runs a thread of resemblance, but they are each unique in their own way. Some may be more ill-intentioned than others, some are likely harmless, but they all call our trust into question.

Abandoning the popular assumption that these various personas represent one archetypal figure in disguise—trickster, devil, or otherwise—allows for richer interpretations of the text that are more consistent with human experience. Each avatar shares similarities, it is true, but can be appraised distinctly. Some may harbor sinister intents, while others may be relatively harmless; some may be telling the truth about where the money is going, and some are likely lying. Rather than embodiments of a single deceptive archetype, the confidence men represent the spectrum of motives and morals found in any setting where strangers intersect and where trust is negotiable. The riverboat’s transient population provides the proscenium through which the reader may examine how deception and credibility function when personal history is unknowable. By resisting the simplicity of a unifying theory, the diverse “masquerade” on the *Fidèle* opens avenues to explore the complex dynamics of truth, lies, vulnerability, and exploitation, which lurk around every corner. Unpacking the many con men circulating about the *Fidèle* would require its own book, so this section will only consider a few. It would be easy to say that they are all the same, and

indeed a cynic might do just that, but to do so would be to neglect the subtle distinctions that distinguish them from one another.

Above all, reading Melville's confidence man as an archetype risks oversimplifying his entire project in the novel. While recurring character types appear across literature, thinking of them as archetypes suggests an ideal form that precedes the lived experience of the various types that embody it. In practical terms, such types emerge from recurring traits and behaviors across cultures and eras, coalescing into patterns that are discernible and can be learned from, imitated, or even improved upon. These patterns, however, are not static archetypes but flexible aggregates shaped by human environments and desires. They gravitate around loose patterns while preserving distinct motives and methods. Some may tell the truth; others may lie. Some may seek profit, others to take advantage, while some may seek alms or engage in simple debate. In any of these cases, blanket categorization obscures minute but important differences that are crucial to evaluating each character.

Therefore, critical analysis that tries to force Melville's characters into an archetypal mold misses the opportunity to read his various confidence men as nuanced depictions of human complexity. The confidence men aboard the *Fidèle* resist simple categorization, much like real people do. Rather than archetypes, these confidence men are better understood as "tautegorical" figures. The term "tautegorical," a portmanteau of "tautology" and "category," was originally found in Coleridge's writings. It indicates a relationship of similarity and difference between representations that hinges upon overlapping concepts, figures, or scenarios. Coleridge writes in *The Statesman's Manual*:

A Symbol is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual, or of the General in the Especial, or of the Universal in the General. Above all, by the translucence of

the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible, and while it enunciates the whole, it abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative...¹³³

Most definitions of the tautegorical reduce it to “similar but with a difference,” and while that is something of an oversimplification, it still provides a useful framework for analyzing patterns in literature and the world, including human behavior. A tautegorical comparison involves examining the meaningful similarities and differences between two concepts. For example, one might compare Huck Finn’s travels with those of Voltaire’s *Candide*—both episodic picaresques that trace a young man’s adventures, albeit in very different environments. The multiplicity of Melville’s confidence men also illustrates this idea in detail. Rather than implying that the confidence man is literally the devil in disguise, Melville presents a range of characters who follow similar patterns but who each operates according to their own rules and within their own contexts. Unlike archetypes, which suggest a static ideal form, tautegeries allow us to analyze recurring patterns while preserving distinctions. A tautegorical approach to literature involves identifying patterns across texts, characters, and genres while paying attention to the unique variations that make each instance distinctive. The confidence men in Melville’s work evoke earlier literary tricksters, but each operates according to his own unique rules. A tautegorical analysis explores how representations echo and diverge, existing in a space between rigid archetypes and strict formalism. This method enables critics to consider general types, like Melville’s confidence men, while recognizing each as a distinct literary occurrence.

¹³³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection, in the Formation of a Manly Character, on the Several Grounds of Prudence, Morality, and Religion*, edited by James Marsh (United States: Chauncey Goodrich, 1829).

Having introduced the concept of the tautegorical as a useful framework for examining recurrences with difference according to context, we will now consider how this applies to several the confidence men novel depicts on the *Fidèle* examining these characters individually while identifying shared threads between them. This will illustrate how Melville people's his riverboat with tricksters who evoke familiar patterns but operate based on their own unique codes.

The Man in Cream Colors

The first confidence man we encounter on the *Fidèle* is the apparently deaf-mute man in cream colors who solicits charity through silent appeals to passersby. He engages in no interaction with the crowd except to write upon a slate he carries in hand, which he continually fills with scriptural invocations to charity. His passivity contrasts sharply with the other operators we will come to see aboard the *Fidèle* as the novel unfolds, all of whom actively engage other passengers and somewhat intensely solicit their confidence. The man in cream colors, however, speaks no dialogue and communicates solely through the verses on his slate, thus endorsing almsgiving as a Christian virtue without aggressively demanding donations. His silence allows passengers to offer aid of their own volition.

Rather than pressuring victims like the various confidence men to come, the man in cream colors projects a kind of dignified resignation that coexists with his visible poverty. He does not beg and does not pretend to suffer intense misery, leaving the passersby to be the judge of his authentic need. While Melville primes the reader to be distrustful of the man in cream colors by introducing him alongside the wanted poster of the mysterious impostor, he provides no textual evidence that the man's sincerity is feigned. The man's unimposing nature, his physical infirmity, and his appeals to scripture imply harmlessness, but even these subtle cues, which themselves may be merely performative,

are enough to stir wariness both in the *Fidèle*'s passengers and in the reader alike.

Melville's decision to introduce this character without providing clear evidence of deceit forces both the passengers on the *Fidèle* and the reader to confront their assumptions about honesty and charity. The man's lack of direct interaction and his reliance on scriptural references could be seen as a sign of genuine piety and need, yet the very context in which he appears—a world populated by confidence men—casts a shadow of doubt over his sincerity. This ambiguity is central to Melville's larger project in *The Confidence-Man*, where he continually blurs the boundaries between appearance and reality, forcing us to question whether we can ever truly know another person's intentions.

In this sense, the man in cream colors functions as a litmus test for the reader's own perceptions and biases. If we are quick to assume that he is a fraud, we must ask ourselves why—are we too cynical, too distrustful of others? If, on the other hand, we choose to believe in his sincerity, are we being naïve, too willing to take things at face value in a world where deception is rampant? While Melville primes the reader to be distrustful of the man in cream colors by introducing him alongside the wanted poster of the mysterious impostor, he provides no textual evidence that the man's sincerity is feigned. The man's unimposing nature, his physical infirmity, and his appeals to scripture imply harmlessness, but even these subtle cues, which themselves may be merely performative, are enough to stir wariness both in the *Fidèle*'s passengers and in the reader alike.

Yet, although the man in cream colors thus embodies the tension between faith and skepticism that runs throughout the novel, one cannot help but notice that, after making his rounds, he falls asleep on the deck, utterly at peace. His serene slumber, exposed to all, suggests a person who, despite the suspicions surrounding him, carries no apparent weight of wrongdoing—no sense of surreptitiousness. His peaceful repose might be seen as a subtle counterpoint to the trickery that pervades the riverboat, further complicating our assessment of his

character. Is he truly in need, or is this tranquility part of a well-crafted act? The ambiguity lingers, leaving us to question whether the man in cream colors is a con artist indeed, or if he represents a rare instance of genuine vulnerability in a world rife with deception.

"Black Guinea"

As the man in cream colors falls into his slumbers, Melville shifts his narrative toward the first instantiation of a confidence man who actively solicits money from other passengers. This character, whom Melville only styles, in typically racist 19th-century fashion, as "black Guinea," is described as much more wretchedly disabled than the man in cream colors, suffering as he does from paraplegia. He is further disenfranchised by being a black man in 1857 Saint Louis. He solicits his livelihood through musical and acrobatic performances, his preferred trick being to catch coins tossed by the crowd in his open mouth. The entire episode paints an uncompromising picture of the kind of minstrelsy that black people might deign to partake in if it meant ingratiating themselves to their white contemporaries. But soon enough, despite his submissive performativity, the crowd of mostly white strangers calls his authenticity into question.

What begins as an argument between an irascible wooden-legged man and a highly vocal Methodist minister eventually descends into mass distrust of the poor beggar. But again, Melville gives us precious little textual evidence to ground our mistrust of him. The racial implications of the crowd's mistrust are deeply ironic, given that the man with the wooden leg insists that black Guinea is, in fact, a white con man merely posing as a disabled Black pauper to garner pity from the crowd. This, however, merely reflects the ingrained prejudices the crowd undoubtedly has against Black people, free or otherwise. Genuinely believing that Melville's black Guinea is a white scam artist in disguise would require both the reader and the crowd to believe two things. First, it would require believing that a white man who darkens

his skin with burnt cork blackface could realistically pass for an actual Black man when seen up close, in person, and in broad daylight. Second, it would require the crowd's concession that a white scam artist might, for some reason, believe that he could successfully solicit charity from a crowd of mostly white Missourians in 1857. To quote *Huck Finn*, "Goodness sakes! would a runaway n—r run south?"¹³⁴

The shift in the crowd's perception of black Guinea underscores a critical commentary on societal trust and prejudice. Initially, the beggar's performance garners sympathy, but as soon as doubt creeps in, the entire atmosphere shifts. The argument between the irascible man with the wooden leg and the Methodist minister gradually exposes deeper societal prejudices. The wooden-legged man's claim—that black Guinea is a white con artist posing as a disabled Black man—reveals the extent of racial biases. This accusation, while reflecting the era's racist assumptions, hinges on two highly improbable beliefs. First, it assumes that a white man could effectively disguise himself as a Black man with burnt cork blackface, convincing people in close proximity and in broad daylight. Second, it presupposes that a white person would choose to exploit racial sympathies in an environment where such deceit would be particularly risky and unlikely to succeed. The skepticism towards black Guinea thus reveals more about the crowd's deep-seated biases than about the beggar's actual trustworthiness. The crowd's swift transition from trust to distrust highlights how racial prejudices can override genuine personal evaluations, turning a man's plea for help into a spectacle of suspicion and scorn.

This deeper mistrust illustrates the complex dynamics of trust and authenticity in a racially divided society. The crowd's readiness to dismiss black Guinea's sincerity, despite his desperate situation and his assurances of support from supposedly reputable individuals,

¹³⁴ HF 168.

underscores the inherent challenges of navigating trust within a framework heavily influenced by racial prejudices. In essence, the beggar's inability to regain trust once lost reflects a broader societal tendency to view marginalized individuals through the lens of prevailing stereotypes rather than on the basis of their actual character or circumstances.

The Good Merchant

Of all the confidence men aboard the *Fidèle*, the so-called “good merchant” is the most obviously sinister. This character, who operates a scheme reminiscent of a Ponzi scheme, preys on those in dire financial straits with promises of outsized returns on an investment of ambiguous nature. His gift, like his appearance, is brief but leaves a significant impact. The good merchant approaches an ailing old man in the corridor, offering him the tantalizing prospect of tripling a \$100 investment if only the elderly man will place his trust in him. Although the merchant's pitch is persuasive enough to secure the old man's investment, it is not without raising considerable suspicion.

From an old buckskin pouch, tremulously dragged forth, ten hoarded eagles, tarnished into the appearance of ten old horn-buttons, were taken, and half-eagerly, half-reluctantly, offered.

“I know not whether I should accept this slack confidence,” said the other coldly, receiving the gold, “but an eleventh-hour confidence, a sick-bed confidence, a distempered, death-bed confidence, after all. Give me the healthy confidence of healthy men, with their healthy wits about them. But let that pass. All right. Good-bye!”

“Nay, back, back—receipt, my receipt! Ugh, ugh, ugh! Who are you? What have I done? Where go you? My gold, my gold! Ugh, ugh, ugh!”

But, unluckily for this final flicker of reason, the stranger was now beyond ear-shot, nor was any one else within hearing of so feeble a call.¹³⁵

There is no honest reason to take investment capital without a written contract and receipt. The fact that this man does so before slipping away into the crowd indicates that he is working an outright scam. Investment capital, by its very nature, involves a significant transfer of money, often in anticipation of future returns or profit. In legitimate business transactions, especially those involving substantial amounts of money, it is a standard and expected practice to have a written contract with a receipt. The receipt provides the grounding for recourse, which is what backs a guarantee. A “guarantee,” inasmuch as it refers to a promise of future delivery, is by nature nebulous, as the future cannot be known. The “guarantee” refers to what will be offered in place of the thing that is promised in the event that the promise cannot be delivered. In financial markets, this guarantee is what collateralizes a financial instrument, and the receipt is proof of this arrangement. Without it, there can be no good faith contract at all.

The nature of the promise made by the good merchant—a “guarantee” of future returns—highlights the inherent risks of such schemes. Guarantees in financial contexts are often nebulous, relying on promises of future delivery that cannot be guaranteed with certainty. In legitimate transactions, collateral or a written agreement serves as a

¹³⁵ *CM* 76.

safeguard against the failure to deliver on these promises. Without such a receipt, the “good” merchant demonstrates that he has no intention of honoring the investment and leaves no trace of his deception.

Frank Goodman, The Cosmopolitan

There are the garden-variety con men who populate the boat, and then there is Frank Goodman, or the “cosmopolitan,” as he calls himself. Dressed in a garish patchwork of styles crowned by a smoking cap, the Cosmopolitan is not concerned with subtlety or passing unnoticed. He is also far less given to running confidence tricks than the other confidence men thus far; his true obsession is not money itself but the concept of money’s bedrock—confidence. He has confidence in abundance—in himself, the world, and the people around him. The most insistently argumentative and philosophical of all the *Fidèle*’s confidence men, the Cosmopolitan seems to operate entirely out in the open. If surreptitiousness were a preferred characteristic of a good confidence man, the Cosmopolitan could not fail more spectacularly, being: “a liberalist, in dress... the stranger sported a vesture barred with various hues, that of the cochineal predominating, in style participating of a Highland plaid, Emir’s robe, and French blouse; from its plaited sort of front peeped glimpses of a flowered regatta-shirt, while, for the rest, white trowsers of ample duck flowed over maroon-colored slippers, and a jaunty smoking-cap of regal purple crowned him off at top...”¹³⁶

Of all the confidence men on the *Fidèle*, only the Cosmopolitan seems to engage in philosophical debate as an end unto itself. Not content with duping passengers out of pocket change, he seems genuinely intent on convincing his fellow passengers that his creed of universal confidence holds the key to a good life. Whether sophist or

¹³⁶ CM 131.

true believer, the enigmatic Cosmopolitan compels attention through his colorful bearing and force of argument. While Melville does suggest that Frank Goodman is the mysterious impostor from the “wanted” poster at the novel’s outset—the barber and his friends agreeing at the end of the penultimate chapter that the curious passenger who had drawn up a meaningless contract in lieu of cash was “quite an original” and invoking the language from the poster—as is the case throughout the novel, there is room for doubt.

The core of the cosmopolitan’s personal doctrine emerges as an extreme form of optimism regarding human nature. Frank Goodman insists that people are inherently worthy of trust and inclined to good will. Financial systems, governments, and everyday commerce all rely on mutual faith, and the cosmopolitan is more than happy to extend this maxim ubiquitously. He appears to be driven by loftier philosophical aims, genuinely committed to convincing the entire ship that his personal view of confidence in humankind is both necessary and correct. In this sense, he is purely ideological, and the novel’s latter third is almost entirely consumed by him impressing his creed upon others.

The novel culminates in the cosmopolitan’s chance meeting with an old man in the ship’s gentleman’s cabin as the action of the novel nears midnight. A single solar lamp casts a dim light ¹³⁷ on the scene, for, as a steward admonishes, the captain has decreed it must remain lit until dawn, as an elemental safeguard against nefarious deeds cloaked under cover of darkness:

¹³⁷ It is worth at least a brief mention that this light is provided a more than usual description, which Melville does not submit to comment. The lamp, producing only a dim light, is fashioned with a “shade of ground glass was all round fancifully variegated, in transparency, with the image of a horned altar, from which flames rose, alternate with the figure of a robed man, his head encircled by a halo” (240). At the very least, it provides an intriguing link to the opening scene of Melville’s narrative and leads into perhaps the most recurrent but ambiguous theme of the book, the demands of reading.

The remaining lamp would have been extinguished as well, had not a steward forbade, saying that the commands of the captain required it to be kept burning till the natural light of day should come to relieve it. This steward, who, like many in his vocation, was apt to be a little free-spoken at times, had been provoked by the man's pertinacity to remind him, not only of the sad consequences which might, upon occasion, ensue from the cabin being left in darkness, but, also, of the circumstance that, in a place full of strangers, to show one's self anxious to produce darkness there, such an anxiety was, to say the least, not becoming.¹³⁸

Under its light, an old man sits alone, poring over a Bible. As the cosmopolitan passes through, he sees the old man alone in the dark and takes the moment as an invitation to join him. Recalling a chat with the barber in a previous chapter, the cosmopolitan admits to feeling doubt for the first and only time in the novel, saying:

“I was told that I would find it written—
 ‘Believe not his many words—an enemy
 speaketh sweetly with his lips’—and also I
 was told that I would find a good deal more to
 the same effect, and all in this book. I could
 not think it; and, coming here to look for
 myself, what do I read? Not only just what was
 quoted, but also, as was engaged, more to the

¹³⁸ *CM* 240-241.

same purpose, such as this: With much communication he will tempt thee; he will smile upon thee, and speak thee fair, and say What wantest thou? If thou be for his profit he will use thee; he will make thee bear, and will not be sorry for it. Observe and take good heed. When thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep.”¹³⁹

Right on cue and with the kind of ironic serendipity only made possible by fiction, a stranger dozing in the corridor cries, “Who’s that describing the confidence-man?” The irony is not lost on the cosmopolitan, who wryly responds, “Awake in his sleep, sure enough, ain’t he?”¹⁴⁰

The conversation quickly returns to the scripture at hand, which the two quickly identify as belonging to the Book of Jesus, Son of Sirach. Learning that this troubling passage comes from Sirach is a great comfort to the cosmopolitan, for being part of the apocrypha, Sirach’s veracity is canonically doubtful. This allows the cosmopolitan to parry aside the wise words of caution from Sirach Chapter 13, which are the total reverse of those in 1 Corinthians 13, the man in cream colors’ preferred scripture.

Their conversation is soon interrupted by a young boy selling various wares to the passengers. After engaging in some loose banter with the cosmopolitan and the old man, the boy is able to work his charms on the latter well enough to sell him a new patent lock and money belt, each of which he assures will protect the old man’s money from any would-be thieves in the dark of night. As a bonus, the boy

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

also gives the old man a counterfeit detector, a type of periodical common in the mid-19th century that helped readers identify the tell-tale signs of counterfeit banknotes. These volumes were often highly detailed and included dozens, if not hundreds, of possible details that could be used to identify a counterfeit. However, the old man, who begins by casually perusing the detector, soon becomes consumed by doubt as he attempts to discern if his own money is good or not. Here Melville brings the novel's various financial and monetary concerns to bear on the old man's attempt at this moment to reassure himself, a task at which he finds himself failing. The cosmopolitan steps in to save him from further despair. He advises the old man to throw away the counterfeit detector entirely, its entire purpose being to ruminate on fraud and deceit. The cosmopolitan sees that what the old man needs instead of fretting late into the night is to get some rest.

Amidst the boundless uncertainty that permeates human affairs, Melville identifies one invariant truth that we all must participate in—that the fundamental needs of our mortal flesh must be met. The drive for sustenance, shelter, and companionship—these arise from a biology more primal than our very species, not from customs or norms. Among such universal needs, Melville sees, is rest. Even the Almighty, with all His infinite power, took time to rest (Gen. 2:2).

*I have heard, that if you pull a bent breath
Through the second hole of a harmonica
Tuned to the key of Georgia
While a train moves by on the tail end of dusk
There is a good chance you will finally know
what it means to rest.
I have not yet rested.¹⁴¹*

¹⁴¹ Wakefield, "The Information Man," 2007.

As the cosmopolitan leads the old man away from the gentleman's cabin and toward his stateroom, he extinguishes the solar lamp that the stewards so strongly admonish passengers not to extinguish, casting the entire place into darkness and doubt. A cynical reading of *The Confidence-Man* leaves the reader with an uneasy feeling as the cosmopolitan leads the old man into the darkness, leaving us to wonder if his intent is to rob the old man. There is an overlay of doubt that permeates the novel right up until its final scene, leaving the reader to wonder about the cosmopolitan's true intentions. But in his assessment of the old man's needs, he is entirely correct—interminable fretting without rest can be nothing but destructive to oneself.

* * *

In the previous chapter, we explored what it means to buck against the *sensus communis* after coming to see that it does not always (or even often) hold up to scrutiny. While critiquing collective assumptions and norms remains a vital exercise, rejecting *sensus communis* outright has limited utility as a philosophical project. We have to trust others for everything—to grow food, secure our money, administer enterprises and bureaucracies, and more. The simple truth is that the individual does not have the mental capacity to worry or care for everything that needs to be worried about or cared for. That is not how we are structured as a species, and therefore not how we are structured as a civilization. Absolute skepticism—indeed, absolutism in anything—inevitably confronts the pragmatic realities of human interdependence.

Thus, while *Huck Finn* is very much a novel about doubting the *sensus communis*, Melville's novel addresses the more perplexing, immediately crucial problem of learning how to know what is good enough to trust in a world where anything could be a deception. Twain's project in teaching adolescents (especially boys in the 19th-century South) how to recognize that their social order is deliberately

manipulating them at their own expense and the expense of others is a very important thing that educated citizens must be able to do. But *Huck Finn* is still a children's book that resonates strongly with rebellious, marginalized youth because this is a youthful preoccupation.

The standard critical approach to Melville's *The Confidence-Man* often involves the neat application of thematized interpretations that strive to fit each element of the narrative into a coherent whole. Critics typically seek to unravel a unified thematic message, one that aligns with a predefined interpretive framework. However, Melville's preoccupation extends beyond crafting a tightly woven story where every part serves the larger narrative purpose. Instead, Melville's focus is on the more profound, existential question of how one determines what is "good enough" to trust in an environment rife with deception. He challenges readers to confront the inherent uncertainties and ambiguities of trust, emphasizing that absolute certainty is elusive. In a world where every interaction could potentially be a deception, Melville pushes us to grapple with the notion of trust not as a concrete, reliable anchor but as a subjective judgment call. This involves weighing the reliability of various mechanisms, whether they are legal systems or personal assurances, and deciding whether they provide sufficient security against potential risks. Thus, the act of trusting becomes an aesthetic and existential judgment—one that involves both logical assessment of risk-mitigating factors and an emotional response to persuasive rhetoric. In essence, what is "good enough" is not just a matter of rational evaluation but also of subjective satisfaction, where trust is granted based on the perceived adequacy of these assurances and the comfort they provide.

The balance of trust and risk is central to any civilization, particularly in its economic structure. The challenge lies in fostering trust among strangers, a microcosm of which is perfectly depicted in the ever-changing setting of the river, with its constant flux of strangers coming and going. This setting, with its lack of grounding or stability,

mirrors the inherent uncertainty and risk in economic transactions. To mitigate such risk, societies have developed mechanisms such as insurance and legal systems. These structures offload much of the “trust” onto pre-vetted, “trustworthy” actors, who are presumed to operate honestly under the threat of punishment. At some level, however, we will need to feel secure in the knowledge that those who hold bad actors accountable will themselves be held accountable, and so on. Deciding to trust someone or something is ultimately an aesthetic judgment, one in which we feel “satisfied,” either by logically understanding the relevant risk-mitigating factors to be a sufficient hedge against any possible loss at stake, or purely emotionally on the strength of rhetoric. In either case, it is “enough.”

In this context, the notion of what constitutes “good enough” extends beyond mere practical arrangements to encompass the more profound, existential aspects of trust and security. It involves recognizing that the pursuit of absolute certainty is not only impractical but also potentially paralyzing. As we navigate the complexities of trust, there comes a point where we must accept that the structures and assurances in place, while imperfect, are sufficient to provide a degree of stability and peace of mind—good enough to rest, to lay your head down and be at peace, at least for a time. This requires greater maturity of thought than rebellion and criticism. It demonstrates the limits of constantly “interrogating institutional structures of power.” No single human being has the cognitive capacity to independently worry about or care for every facet of their own existence. We are not built for such hyper-vigilance as a species, and so we are not built for it as a society. We must rely on the competence and good faith of countless others who grow food, secure money, administer bureaucracies, and more. Ultimately, we must be able to sleep at night, secure in the knowledge that, as we let our guards down to rest, we are safe.

*Everyone shall sit under their own vine
and under their fig tree,*

*And no one shall make them afraid...*¹⁴²

Good judgment often lies in conceding that something is “good enough,” and rarely does it involve adhering to absolutes. What makes that interdependence tranquil enough to live in is our willingness to make concessions in skepticism—which, as we have discussed, involves externalizing risks into mitigation practices. Still, we recognize that these mitigation practices, like insurance policies or security systems, can only do so much to account for every possible disaster. The desire for absolute certainty may only spiral into an endless abyss of doubt, keeping us from ever feeling secure enough to lay down our heads in peace. But the fatigue of the old man symbolizes the need to balance virtue and pragmatism to create a world livable for vulnerable, finite beings who nevertheless are ends-in-themselves.

¹⁴² Micah 4:4, NKJV.

Conclusion: Can Common Sense Be Taught?

This too is vanity and a chasing after wind.

—ECCLESIASTES 4:4¹⁴³

Whether we arrive at a judgment “on our own” or simply receive one that is common knowledge, it still falls to each of us to decide if we think the judgment is valid. It is a matter of choosing whose judgment we trust to make the judgment at hand. The process of judgment necessitates both an understanding of the context and the ability to view an object or event through the lens of the *a priori* principle of purposiveness. However, for any judgment to hold significance, we must be able to validate its credibility. This validation will necessarily require one’s trust at some point. This is not to suggest that we should abandon skepticism or doubt, nor does it imply that we should blindly accept everything we encounter, regardless of what silver-tongued charmers like Frank Goodman might say. Rather, it emphasizes that in all judgments—which form the basis of our understanding of the world and its constituents—we must reach a point of self-agreement in which we consider the evidence, reasoning, and grounding of judgments that structure the very framing of our worldview to be sound. For us to consider our judgments valid and thus believe them to be true, we must be able to assert that they meet a reliable standard of trust. In other words, all matters of interpretation and understanding circle back to the same question: *How do I know I can trust my own judgment?*

Trust, as we have seen, is a matter of judgment, and ultimately it is an aesthetic one. Aesthetics refers to that which is felt, and we must

¹⁴³ KJV.

feel that our standards of trust have been satisfied in order to truly extend it to a counterparty. However, this is a delicate balance. The argument may seem to privilege judgment based on feeling at the expense of logic, but this is not at all the case. Logic plays a crucial role in breaking down concepts and propositions into precise, discrete elements and is instrumental in applying mathematical theory to physical reality, thus enabling a level of precision and predictability that aesthetics alone cannot manage. But, recalling Peirce's movement from the aesthetic to the ethical to the logical (and finally the metaphysical, the "after physics"), logical propositions are privileged or disregarded based on their relative "goodness," which has every bearing on the end to which they are meant to satisfy. If a programmer asks themselves if the code they have written is "good," what are they asking? If it is logically sound? Code must be logically sound to function, but to ask if it is good is to ask something more. For contrary to any Platonic misconception of idealized value systems, asking "What is good?" can only be answered with "Good for what?"

From the initial question of whether something is good and what it might be good for proceeds a cascade of further inquiries regarding the specific purpose it serves as well as whose benefit it serves. For, contrary to the idea that "the Good" is an ideal form whose various instantiations populate the real world, the notion of goodness is always indexed against desired outcomes and intended beneficiaries. In human affairs, the central question is ultimately what we, both as individual moral agents and as collective entities, deem good through reflection on aesthetic experience and ethical concerns. Further, discerning goodness amidst complex human realities inherently necessitates careful consideration of multiple situated perspectives of multiple participants in any given situation—stakeholders, to use the parlance of our times. This cannot be done through the application of pure logic or the appeal to rigid doctrine. It invariably depends upon reflective engagement with genuine contingencies, not ideological presumptions. This is not to say that there is no room for idealism in our reflection on

the contingencies at hand; it is simply to assert that we must not get lost in them.

Articulating common sense requires avoiding the temptation to “define” the concept in absolute theoretical terms. Rather than a fixed theory, common sense is more concerned with contingency and navigating situations when strict theories fail to provide clear answers. It focuses precisely on scenarios where reliable solutions do not readily present themselves. Ideological thinking can be at odds with common sense if it is not calibrated to align with the nuances of the circumstances at hand. Acting solely based on ideological principles, without accounting for contextual factors, can often backfire in practice. This is not to say one must abandon ideological systems entirely. Rather, it cautions against letting predetermined ideological positions supersede pragmatic considerations of possible outcomes. In most situations, we cannot let abstract calculus derived from ideology alone dictate our actions. Instead, exercising common sense involves deliberating on what the tangible consequences of a particular decision should be for the specific situation, beyond just ideological consistency. We must be guided by contextual contingencies and desired ends, not absolute fidelity to a doctrine.

Therefore, the first core conceit behind exercising common sense is this: pay attention. The particular demands of the situation must always be taken into consideration first and last; it is unwise to approach any circumstance requiring prudent judgment with rigid adherence to preconceived notions of the ideal solution. The second conceit to bear in mind is this: aesthetics—meaning, our feelings—matter. Feelings and emotions (which are not voluntary but nonetheless ground us in our lived reality within the world) should not be dismissed as clouding judgment; on the contrary, these provide the very metrics by which we evaluate whether our logical deliberations have yielded desired outcomes. Sound common sense involves first comprehending the aesthetic landscape of a context to discern what ends are sought. With desired outcomes as guideposts, practical reason can strategize

solutions. But persistent reflection remains imperative—we must continuously re-evaluate if our thinking still applies to evolving realities and aligns with our purposes.

In any situation involving collective existence, open discourse is imperative. As social beings, we must find ways to negotiate the question of what constitutes a society we are willing to peacefully co-inhabit. Ideological frameworks can inform these deliberations but often fall short in accounting for real-world complexities. That said, much of human history has been dominated by autocratic systems of government in which normative rules and values were for the most part dictatorially prescribed for most people. The reticence to embrace the normative is undoubtedly a substantiated concern. Yet some shared ethical substrate remains necessary for meaningful cooperation. This can only be accomplished through active communication and most successfully through immediate conversation. Through sincere, inclusive, and good faith dialogue, communities can identify baseline norms that enable successful cohesion amid irrepressible complexities. The alternative, polarization and dissolution, inures to no one's benefit.

Peirce's movement from the aesthetic, to the ethical, and finally to the logical provides a pragmatic framework for developing communal ethics. What merely feels correct must be interrogated against what engenders objective good in the world. This requires the precise, quantitative reasoning of logic to translate sentiment into action. We discover our common sentiments through communication; despite a multitude of perspectives, certain shared values do emerge. As a species, human beings intrinsically seek to survive and propagate themselves; as individuals, we desire to live flourishing lives unencumbered by hardship or suffering. While societal structures may seem indifferent to these feelings, the entire project of civilization itself is to accommodate them, striving as it does to render existence more bearable through order and cooperation. Thus, the need for rules and norms in the first place is not arbitrary, for they are the very thing that allows communities to cohere around codes of conduct. Logic alone

cannot dictate these practical ethics. Pure mathematics lacks intent, being indifferent to human needs. But our aesthetic inclinations and emotional experiences provide the phenomenological foundation for conceptualizing moral ends.

The establishment of true common-sense values necessitates an exploration of thoughts, reactions, and feelings (aesthetics) elicited through the consideration of a common text. Such texts provide a shared space for imaginative contemplation, allowing for collective consideration and discussion of the implications, stakes, dynamics, and more in the text. This is reliably possible in part because there can be no dispute over the actual words of a given text. While we can endlessly debate the intended meaning of a phrase like “Juliet is the sun,” we cannot deny that the characters J-U-L-I-E-T I-S T-H-E S-U-N appear in that order within the text. Nor can we dispute that these letters spell the words they do without betraying a complete ignorance of the English language. In an almost infinitely deniable world, a common text is the thing that can provide us solid footholds for discussion. Therefore, a common text serves an indispensable function by providing a shared frame of reference for discussion, debate, and discourse. In fact, if there has ever been a “good” reason to ensure that students study literature in any context, this is it.

The greatest strength in the Western intellectual tradition lies in its attitudes toward reading. The availability of texts spanning myriad genres, authors, and perspectives has provided invaluable fodder for reflection, while unconstrained readership, coupled with the freedom to discuss sensitive matters candidly, enables the productive intellectual discourse essential to sound judgment at a communal level. In particular, imaginative literature presents concepts and subjects that may be difficult to engage with in lower-stakes contexts. Fiction invites speculative consideration of hypothetical scenarios and their implications, through prompting readers to ask “What if [x]?” This allows a collective sounding board for wrestling with complex interpersonal dynamics and ethical quandaries. A common text thus

serves an indispensable function by providing a shared frame of reference to ground exploratory discourse and debate. It provides diverse minds a substantive foothold for unpacking thorny issues from multiple angles while maintaining its constancy.

Of course, free dialogue has risks, including confusion, offense or manipulation. But these are outweighed by gains in mutual comprehension and empathy. These challenges simply demand nuanced, open-ended discussion. Literature, mathematics, history, science, and the arts provide the tools of comprehension, but continuous, good-faith dialogue hones their application for human flourishing. Thus: free societies depend upon cultivating a responsible, yet exploratory, rhetorical culture built around its works of art and literature. This is why we place this profession in a privileged position—to remind ourselves and our social order that the practice of reading and discussing literature is an indispensable boon to society, one that we have come to recognize as worth preserving.

And this has been central to our advancements as a species and civilization. A common text serves an indispensable function by furnishing a shared frame of reference to anchor exploratory discourse and debate. Imaginative literature in particular provides fertile ground for grappling with ethically complex scenarios and social dynamics that may feel threatening to confront when stakes are high. Fictional narratives allow collective speculation regarding hypothetical situations and their implications. Readers are prompted to ask, “What if [x]?” and they are invited to envision contingent outcomes given imagined conditions. Engaging fiction and literature as a group—which is to say, reading together, analyzing jointly, and discussing various interpretations—develops competencies essential to sound communal judgment and to our capacity for coexistence amid complexity. Collectively wrestling with the open questions posed by literary texts hones skills for recognizing viewpoints, understanding motivation, tracing consequences, and deliberating principles that ought to guide individual and collective conduct when societal

conventions are corrupt or inadequate. Such sustained dialogue around shared touchstones makes space for the assumptions embedded in disparate interpretations to rise to the surface where they can be identified, scrutinized, and, if necessary, justified. Failing that, they might then be rejected, or at least cordoned off at a safe distance.

This speculative space is especially valuable in educational settings, where discourse can be bound, moderated, and made useful through best practices and mandatory mutual respect. When disagreements emerge through engaging a common text, each side's foundational reasoning is questioned as the text introduces contingencies that cannot easily be dealt with or ignored. Thus, students are compelled to examine and articulate core principles underpinning their interpretations and positions. This process of reflective clarification forges mutual understanding and cultivates sound judgment. Rather than enforcing rigid consensus, quality texts expand the realm of possible meanings. They also crucially provide common frames of reference that serve as an anchor for conversation while opening avenues for pluralistic interpretation.

This project has endeavored to participate in this exercise by considering questions of common sense and good judgment as they appear as thematic concerns within two 19th-century American novels. Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* offers a powerful example of fiction's ability to articulate a need for deep collective reckoning with entrenched societal injustice and normalized cruelty. Through the satirical first-person narration of its dispossessed adolescent protagonist, Twain ferociously critiques the manifold of hypocrisies and arbitrary cruelties endemic to the *sensus communis* of the antebellum American South. The hollow pious religiosity used to excuse atrocities, its codes of so-called "honor" designed primarily to reinforce existing hierarchies of race, gender, and class, and, above all, its assumptions of white supremacy used to justify the brutal dehumanizing institution of chattel slavery, are all subject to Twain's criticism. Over the course of his journey down the Mississippi River,

Huck is repeatedly confronted with the need to act in response to the injustices and inhumanities embedded in the social order into which he was born, while also being required to tailor his actions towards survival itself. As he comes to see Jim's full humanity and to empathize deeply with his friend, Huck also undergoes profound moral development, taking it upon himself to assume tremendous personal risks in order to aid Jim's escape. As a moral agent, Huck takes his cues not from the imposed dogma of his culture but from his own capacity for sound practical judgment and empathy.

Huckleberry Finn illustrates the maturation of sound, practical judgment by questioning and ultimately rejecting cruelties embedded in the Southern *sensus communis*. Huck prioritizes empathy over convention, guided by ethical intuitions honed through harsh experience. His calculated decisions privilege real-world outcomes over loyalty to prevailing social conventions or ideological abstractions. Huck's pragmatic calculus reflects deep reserves of empathy, leading him to risk grave censure and danger by rejecting complicity in chattel slavery. His reflective trajectory illustrates the cultivation of moral courage and sound judgment in resisting an unjust status quo. Twain's novel also provides a vivid literary sandbox for rehearsing the timeless skill of perspective-taking. By considering how one might respond when placed in Huck's precarious position, readers can flex their moral imagination. We are prompted to inquire into characters' motives and accountability, tracing the origins and impacts of their fateful choices, and reflecting on what first principles truly guide ethical action when norms prove untenable. Such sustained, open-ended discourse around a shared text forces assumptions to the surface and underscores the limits of ideological rigidity when navigating complex human realities.

As an equally masterful, if more obscure, example, Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* crafts an intricately layered inquiry into the problems surrounding trust, perception, and credibility that permeate both interpersonal exchanges and institutional frameworks

when definitive evidence is not readily available. Set aboard a crowded riverboat making its way down the Mississippi River on April Fool's Day, Melville's novel presents a microcosm of the mid-19th century American frontier, which was undergoing rapid development under relatively little government supervision. It is into this fluid milieu of transient strangers that Melville introduces his array of rogues, grifters, con men, panhandlers, philanthropists, and solicitors, as well as their potential victims and marks. By tracing the confidence men's diverse ruses and machinations aboard the riverboat, Melville dramatizes the constant negotiation between trust and circumspection demanded by life among ever-changing multitudes. Like *Huck Finn*, Melville resists reduction to simplistic maxims or formulas, through richly layered scenarios that force persistent re-evaluation as circumstances evolve. His cast illustrates the spectrum of motives underlying interpersonal exchanges, highlighting the need for balanced perspective attuned to nuance. Thus, *The Confidence-Man* provides fertile ground for collective deliberation on the problem of trust in institutions and individuals when certainty is elusive.

While Melville suggests that unconditional confidence opens oneself up to exploitation, his perplexing narrative forces the reader to reflect on the intrinsic necessity of trust for society to function at all. Given that imperfect information and limited means to conclusively verify identities or intentions exist either within Melville's novel or within the real world, a delicate equilibrium between prudent skepticism and pragmatic faith in institutions must be maintained. Melville dramatizes the constant active tension between doubt and openness that dominates our interactions with others. His masquerade of confidence men underscores the epistemic limits inherent to judgment and reason, especially when making snap judgments amid multitudes of strangers whose personal histories are unknowable. Yet even as he highlights these limits, Melville nevertheless affirms the need to eventually assess evidence to the point of satisfaction and, as such, avoid paralysis in both action and decision making. Whereas

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is in many ways about learning how to withhold one's trust, Melville's text takes up the more difficult question of how to judiciously extend one's trust to someone or something. Each of these is a critically important task, and each is equally important to the exercise of sound judgment and the practice of common sense.

* * *

Cultivating common sense requires sincere, inclusive communication in a safe environment in which the stakes are low and the discussion free to roam where it will. Therefore, cultivating common sense in the classroom is effectively done through the study and discussion of literature. This facilitates sustained discussion, grounded on common texts, of what passes for acceptable and unacceptable normative principles. Divergent views and overlapping values may coalesce into meaningful progress when all voices are allowed to contribute equally under fair discursive rules, with all venturing to discuss the matter of stakes, consequences, and desired outcomes. Logic and reason may work to implement agreed-upon goals, but it is the aesthetic considerations of the collective and the individuals that it comprises that are the raw materials to consider.

Ultimately, teaching common sense resists any attempt at foolproof transmission; it is instead an ongoing intellectual exercise honed through lifelong practice. It is in the humanities, and especially in literary studies, that we find the most vital methods for its cultivation. Studying the diverse artistic perspectives and histories that inform all aspects of world literature expands our capacity for reflection while granting space to scrutinize ethical complexities that defy schemas, dogmas, religions, and ideologies. Above all, literature provides the invaluable shared frameworks upon which we may exercise judgment through open-ended speculation, wrestling with contingencies, unsettling assumptions, and clarifying disagreements. If engaged

sincerely, quality texts foster the habits of mind conducive to good judgment and common sense: intellectual humility, adaptability, empathy, critical reason, doubt, and at some level faith. While complete, definitive instruction in these areas is impossible within the confines of a formal curriculum, humanities education nevertheless stands to benefit from directly and explicitly invoking the role of common sense within its various disciplines. Although the idea itself resists distillation into pedagogical formulas, it stands as an admirable aim of a conscientious curriculum and is undeniably worth cultivating as an object of inquiry within the larger liberal arts tradition.

Literary texts are not mere academic exercises; they are crucial tools for cultivating common sense. They offer a shared space for critical reflection and discourse, allowing us to examine the interplay between our aesthetic sensibilities and our logical reasoning. By thoughtfully engaging with these texts in an inclusive manner, we develop the intellectual virtues necessary for navigating the multifaceted nature of human judgment. In recognizing the value of common sense within the broader framework of humanities education, we underscore its importance as a foundational element of a well-rounded intellectual life. While it may resist easy categorization or definitive instruction, common sense is nonetheless a crucial aspect of our ability to make reasoned and empathetic decisions in an ever-changing world. It is through the ongoing practice of reflective, informed dialogue—rooted in the study of literature and the humanities—that we can best cultivate this vital faculty.

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